

CANADIAN CINEMA
CHANGING DIRECTIONS
FESTIVALS
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LOS ANGELES
LESBIAN DESIRES
UNBOUND
HAWKS REVIEWED

NUMBER 45 \$7 CDN \$6 US

*cine***ACTION**

RADICAL FILM CRITICISM AND THEORY



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45

Each year, the Toronto International Film Festival allows Toronto audiences, including our editorial collective, delightful access to hundreds of films from all over the world. We are particularly grateful to the Festival for their generosity to CineAction and the always helpful assistance of the Film Reference Library. This issue reviews a selection of films from all over the cinematic world which premiered at the Festival in September, 1997. We also have a report from recent film festivals in Los Angeles, highlighting important developments in alternative and oppositional cinema and television.

With recent successes by David Cronenberg, Atom Egoyan, Clement Virgo, Robert Lepage and others, Canadian cinema is receiving unprecedented international attention. Our eye-catching cover features one of the many Peters in John Greyson's *Uncut*, lounging on another Peter—that is, former Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau. Greyson's work represents a welcome political, sexual and aesthetic audacity in Canadian filmmaking; several authors survey new developments in direction, style and themes in films from Canada and Québec.

Finally, we have included, in this eclectic mix, a discussion of the complexities of lesbian spectatorship in a recent American independent hit and a review of a new biography of one of the great Hollywood auteurs.

Scott Forsyth



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THE COLLECTIVE

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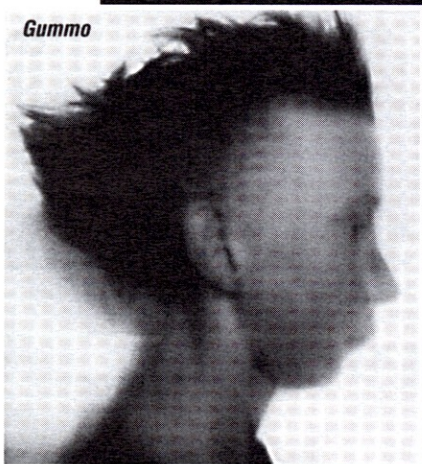
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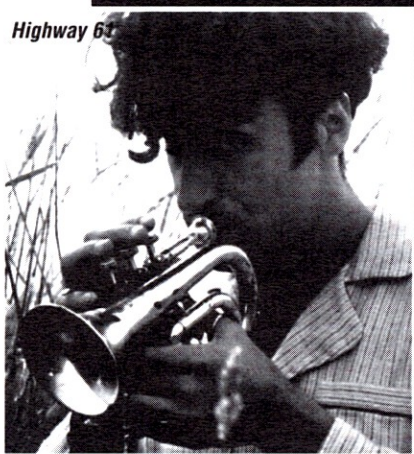
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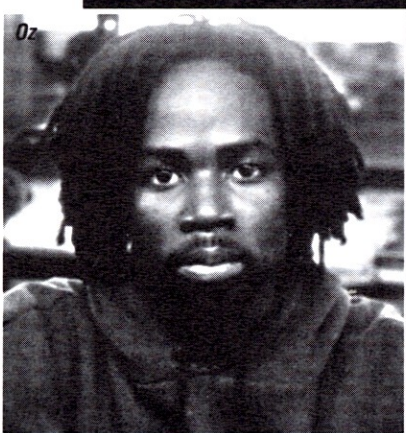
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THE CANADA COUNCIL
FOR THE ARTS
SINCE 1957

LE CONSEIL DES ARTS
DU CANADA
DEPUIS 1957

by **Peter Harcourt**

Faces Changing Colour Changing Canon

**Shifting cultural foci within
Contemporary Canadian Cinema**

"Khuyen" in *Lulu*



*Is not the mirror both a reflection
of reality and a projection of the
imagination?*

—Carlos Fuentes¹

*Every living being is also a fossil.
Within it, all the way down to the
microscopic structure of its proteins,
it bears the traces if not the stigmata
of its ancestry.*

—Jacques Monod²



In the early days, Canadian cinema was a dual cinema.

Initiating largely in Upper and Lower Canada, it was English and French. While the sites of initiation haven't changed that much, allowing largely television production on the east and west coasts, the simple duality has altered considerably. The *pure laine* cinemas from Ontario and Quebec have given way to a mixed weave of different colours and cultures.

The classic films of the early period were from one tradition or the other. Indeed, the presence of a dignified French-Canadian in the café scene in *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (1964) was a rarity in those days. More characteristic was the "Uncle Tomism" implicit in *Amanita Pestilens* (1963) through the finicky French Canadian who lived next door in the predominantly Anglo suburb of Mount Royal in Montreal. Or even worse was the totally anglophone Montreal depicted in *Prologue* (1969) without so much as a hint of a French sign or French-speaking voice. *Prologue* displays the Montreal that had to change—that had to become more French.

Before there was a multicultural cinema with a post-colonial theory to support it, however, this classic Canadian cinema was far more colonial in its attitudes than has readily been acknowledged.

In the 1960s and 1970s, *À tout prendre* (1963), *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (1964), *Le chat dans le sac* (1964), and *Paperback Hero* (1973) all constructed cultures of entrapment, as *Termini Station* (1989) does today; while *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* (1967), *Goin' Down the Road* (1970), *l'Acadie, l'Acadie* (1971), *John and the Missus* (1986) and, more recently, *Highway 61* (1991) are all films of displacement and migration. Canadian ontology has always been bound up with a dialectics of space, and one of our dominant narrative modes both in literature and film involves the quest.

The classic québécois films of this period often involved both the exploration of space and the retrieval of time. *Tendresse ordinaire* (1973), a film of uncertain temporal narration, relates the tininess of the characters to the vast spaces of the country that engulfs them; while in *Les maudits sauvages* (1971), the trapper's journey from the Indian encampment back towards civilization is simultaneously a journey from the stockades of the 17th century to the disco bars of present-day Montreal.

1. *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World*, by Carlos Fuentes. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), p.11

2. Cited in "Fossil and Psyche," by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. (London: Routledge, 1995) p.185

Five stills
from *Rude*

Rude



Curtis and
Jordan



Jessica and
Luke



Luke and
Johnny



The films of this classic period constituted a cinematic essentialism. What kind of films are truly Canadian? critics frequently asked; while in Quebec, with greater sophistication, the filmmakers themselves wished to create a cinema that was as distinctly québécois as the Western was American.³

These attitudes informed most production at that time and turned out the films that constitute our cinematic heritage. Distinguished though they are, however, they did not "take" with the Canadian public. There were, of course, economic reasons for this refusal—the foreign ownership of our theatres and distribution systems, along with the indifference of our public television channels towards transmitting out-of-house Canadian production. But there was also something limited about the films themselves. In essence, they constituted an art-house cinema, a cinema of reflection; and while claiming to speak for the entire nation, they really only enunciated our two foundation cultures.⁴

How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when discussing the 'other')?

—Edward W. Said⁵



The 1980s began to see a change. Initially, the films were made *about* Canada's ethnic or aboriginal communities. At the National Film Board, there was *Sitting in Limbo* (1986), an improvisational drama about a black community in Montreal; and *Welcome to Canada* (1989), an exploration of the reception of Tamil refugees marooned on the east coast of Newfoundland. In Toronto, there was *Milk and Honey* (1988), a film scarred by production difficulties but containing an astonishing performance by Josette Simon as Joanna, the live-in Jamaican maid; and there was *Clearcut* (1991), a presentation of an angry native activist (Graham Greene) protesting rapacious logging practices in the Canadian north. Later, Bruce McDonald made *Dance Me Outside* (1995) about life on an Indian reservation in northern Ontario and went on, with Norman Jewison, to produce the television series, "The Rez". John L'Ecuyer made *Curtis's Charm* (1995)—an eccentrically innovative depiction of the paranoid fantasies of a black crack-head (Maurice Dean Wint); Jeremy Podeswa made *Eclipse* (1994), an affectionate bi-sexual, multi-cultural remake of Max Ophüls' *La Ronde* (1950); and Midi Onodera, with *Skin Deep* (1994), produced the ultimate cross-cultural film, comprising a black woman who speaks Japanese (Melanie Nicholls-King) and with everyone in this expressionistic fable pretending to be something they are not.

Of course, some of these films were still colonial in many of their attitudes.⁶ Bit by bit, however, production facilities passed into other hands. Through federally organized multicultural initiatives, the proliferation of specialty television channels, a growing diversity of sources of funding, the enterprise of the Canadian Film Centre in Toronto and the enormous publicity machine for new Canadian product generated by (especially) the Toronto International Film Festival, a more representative number of cultural voices began to be heard—now making films *from* Canada's ethnic and aboriginal communities.

Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.

—Stuart Hall⁷

One of the first to emerge was Atom Egoyan. Of Egyptian birth and Armenian extraction, in his early work Egoyan remains the most explicitly contestational of all the new Canadian filmmakers. Indeed, his first feature, *Next of Kin* (1984), is a deliberate refusal of the angloceltic values culturally constructed by Don Owen and his team in *Nobody Waved Goodbye*.⁸

Recognizing that identity is less a matter of essence than of cultural positioning, less an inheritance than a potential politics, Egoyan's Peter deliberately refuses his angloceltic filiations in Victoria in order to affiliate himself with an Armenian family in Toronto. Only by accepting some form

of cultural schizophrenia—indeed, a chiasmic sense of self—can Peter begin to negotiate his way out of the stifling inheritance of the angloceltic middle classes.⁹

The equally stifling characteristics of both the East Indian and the Jewish middle classes is explored in Deepa Mehta's *Sam & Me* (1991). Written by Ranjit Chowdhry, *Sam & Me* tells the story of a young East Indian immigrant, Nick (Chowdhry), who is assigned to look after an ornery Jewish grandfather (Peter Boretski).

Often playing with stereotypes and working for easy laughs, *Sam & Me* has many of the characteristics of a television movie. Finally, however, the film is deeply moving.

If the classic Canadian cinema of both English Canada and Quebec lacked admirable authority figures—there are only inadequate fathers in anglophone production and no fathers at all in Quebec's—*Sam & Me* confronts head-on the hypocritical authority figures of the middle generation of social accomodators, whether Jewish or East Indian.

Zada's son, Moishe (Heath Lamberts) is a monster, a total racist determined to disinherit even his own father; while Nick's uncle, Parikh (Om Puri), is *the* obsequious East Indian—totally sexist in attitude, doing everything he can to insinuate himself into white society. Nick, on the other hand, through the genuine affection he feels for the "zada" entrusted to his care, is transformed into full seriousness and into a caring responsibility.

Neither the young Indian nor the old Jew are happy in Canada. For Nick, it is reform school; for Zada, prison—a twin displacement of ethnic and generational exile. Nevertheless, when Moishe goes away for a weekend, Nick and Zada plan a night out on the town.

Nick takes him to a party within his own East Indian community—one far removed from traditional Hindu culture. Complete with cross-dressing, exotic dancing and homosexual relationships, it represents another form of exile in this film.

Zada really enjoys himself and refuses to go home, in

3. For instance, see Jacques Leduc: "... Il faut trouver un langage cinématographique authentique, québécois, qui nous appartient. Un langage par lequel les gens vont reconnaître une forme cinématographique qu'ils ont latente en eux, un peu comme les Américains se retrouvent dans les westerns de John Ford." *Le Cinéma Québécois par ceux qui font*, ed. by Léo Bonneville. (Montréal: Édition Pauline, 1979), p.535

4. For a discussion of these issues, see "In Our Own Eyes: The Canonizing of Canadian Film," by Peter Morris. *Responses: in honour of Peter Harcourt*, ed. by Blaine Allan, Michael Dorland and Zuzana M. Pick. (Kingston: The Responsibility Press, 1992), pp.145-165

5. *Orientalism*, by Edward W. Said. (NY: Vintage Books, 1979), p.325

6. For a discussion of colonial attitudes in both *Sitting In Limbo* and *Milk and Honey*, see "Rhetorical Remarks towards the Politics of Otherness," by Kass Banning. *CineAction!* 16 (May 1989), p.19

7. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," by Stuart Hall. *Framework* 36 (London, 1989), p.68

8. For this cultural inheritance, see "The Beginning of a Beginning," by Peter Harcourt. *Self-Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Quebec Cinemas*, ed. by Pierre Véronneau and Piers Handling. (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1980), pp.64-76

9. For a further discussion of Egoyan's work, see "Imaginary Images: An Examination of Atom Egoyan's Films." *Film Quarterly* (Vol 48, No 3), Spring 1995, pp.2-14

spite of Nick's implorations. The party culminates the next morning with Zada playing cricket with his new-found Asian friends, the exertions of which cause a minor heart attack. Amid the panic that ensues, a Jamaican appears from an upstairs window and rushes down to deliver mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the stricken man.

The subversions of this sequence are multiple. Not only is there the cross-dressing and the homosexuality of the evening before, but we have an old Jew playing the white-man's game with a bunch of Indo-Canadians which culminates in a *nigrum ex machina* delivering the kiss of life on the old Jew's lips.

Potentially, this gesture represents a moment of interracial outrage. Actually, it is a magnificent moment of intercultural bonding within this diasporic community of men exiled from their homes, from their families, and their women, all in search of new forms of community and fulfillment.

After Nick has been torn from his adopted Zada, he is reduced to a skivvy for an exploitative Chinese restaurant—another reference to intercultural tension and to neo-colonial authority figures. Rather sentimentally, Zada is killed; and, while he has paid off his debts to his uncle, Nick now seems defeated and alone.

In a way that is reminiscent of the endings of classic Canadian films like *Goin' Down the Road* (1969) or *Montreal Main* (1972), Nick is left finally with the question, thrown at him by his uncle, "Where in the hell do you think you're goin'?" In this way, in spite of all the interrogations, subversions, and displacements of the established shibboleths of Jewish and East Indian culture, we are thrust back to that primordial Canadian question, perhaps even more relevant now for new Canadians, "Where is here?"¹⁰

I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination.

—bell hooks¹¹

Uncertainty of place is also present in *Masala* (1991)—for Srinivas Krishna, an extraordinary cinematic debut. A wonderful mixture of fantasy and seriousness, an ironic post-colonial examination of angloceltic bureaucracy and a parodic post-modernist romp, in *Masala*, every hint of authority is mocked throughout—whether the authority of fathers or of the multicultural state.

The entire Indian community seems dependent upon the good will of the Minister for Multi-Culturalism, who sports a bow-tie and carries around a fluffy dog called Winston. Nevertheless, this man seems to have inherited the power once held by the ancient Hindu gods, one of whom the old grandmother can access through the outer channels of her VCR!

The most delightfully satirized authority figure, however, is the female Mountie (Janet Joy Wilson), dressed in full ceremonial regalia, seeking a quarter from Lallu Bhai (Saheed Jaffrey) for the meter outside at which she has parked her horse. Not only does her gender, size, uniform, and means of transport mock all kinds of received assumptions about our national police force, but the feminization of this authority figure encourages these new Canadians not to take her seriously.

If *Masala* met with considerable critical acclaim, Krishna's next feature, *Lulu* (1996) was not so fortunate. Neither the festival screenings at Cannes nor at Toronto generated support for the film and, after a short run at Toronto's Carlton Cinemas, it has disappeared from view.

Intelligent in conception and disturbing in implication, *Lulu* is a contemporary *film noir* about the illegal transportation of meat. Whether shanks of lamb, dead bodies, or a Vietnamese mail-order bride, the handling of flesh in this film is opportunistic and immoral. It generally involves money and often involves theft. It takes place in the intimidating streets of Anytown—which is to say, all over the world.

In *Lulu*, the two central characters are denied their real names. Khuyen (Kim Lieu), the Vietnamese mail-order bride, is called Lulu by her husband—apparently as a term of endearment, with no recognition of its associations with prostitution (yet a prostitute she has become). Her husband, Steven (Michael Rhoades), who purchased Lulu from a video catalogue, is called Lucky by his friend, again with no recognition of the ironies involved for this pathetic male. His friend Clive (Clark Johnson), who is also after Lulu, has even less to offer her than the unfortunate Lucky.

Working at a cosmetic counter in a large department store, Lulu is a specialist in the application of masks. Nothing in this film is as it appears. Even the video documentary by the Chilean refugee, Miguel (Manuel Aranguiz), will be falsified by his own manipulations behind the scenes.

After the unsettling world success of *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), as if to test both his own abilities and his audience, Norman Mailer wrote *Barbary Shore* (1951)—a book that many still consider a failure. It is not, of course, any more than is *Lulu*; but both works are difficult and both require an attentive allegiance. Both are Kafka-esque in their bleakness and both relate to the sewer side of contemporary civilization. Both required courage to produce and both remain challenging.

Although *Lulu* does suffer at times from an uncertainty of tone and is not without a few implausibilities, it does *not* fail (in my view) because of the acting inadequacies of the central character—the easiest way critics found of not confronting the film. Speaking in a monotone throughout (as if post-synched), Khuyen's voice is reminiscent of the voices we associate with aboriginal women;¹² and since she was extremely animated while talking about the film at the

Toronto International Film Festival, I assume that if in the film her voice is flat it is because Krishna wanted it that way. By repressing her voice, he has underlined her oppression.

The difficulties with *Lulu*, in spite of its intelligence, may have been the result of Krishna's determination to control every aspect of production, thereby inhibiting the film's spontaneity. But interesting it remains and, after the pomo romp of *Masala*, it represents the work of a filmmaker who is not afraid of pursuing fresh areas of cinematic investigation. With *Lulu*, Srinivas Krishna has made his *Barbary Shore*.

No living culture is ever static. Collectively, human beings struggle to master their physical environment and in the process create a social one.

—Ngugi wa Thiong'o¹³

The mid-nineties have seen a wonderful explosion of first-time films from other-culture Canadians. Canada has moved from the dual cinema of the past towards a cinema of cultural diversity. Although there had been *Small Pleasures* (1993), Keith Lock's quiet feature before her, Mina Shum delighted the world with *Double Happiness* (1994) about a young Chinese-Canadian girl (Sandra Oh) growing up in Vancouver; and along with *Lulu* and *Medicine River* (1994), a television film about an aboriginal community in Alberta, there have been Stephen Williams's *Soul Survivor* and Clement Virgo's *Rude*—both about the Jamaican community in Toronto and both released in 1995.

In Quebec, other-culture filmmakers have been less in evidence, except for the Latin-Americans who, like the aboriginal Alanis Obomsawin, have worked largely in documentary. There has been, however, the Haitian-Canadian cult classic, *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1989); and in a number of films, allophone references have begun to appear. Indeed there was another cult film in the 1980s (a great hit at the Berlin Film Festival) shot in English, *Mother's Meat Freud's Flesh* (1984), by Demetri Demetrios; and a number of films by Bachar Chbib—*Evixion* (1986), *Seductio* (1987), *Clair Obscur* (1988)—before he moved to the United States. In French, *Une histoire inventée* (1990), *Le fabuleux voyage de l'Ange* (1991), *Eldorado* (1995) and—most recently—*Cosmos* (1997) all depict,

10. "Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*," by Northrop Frye. *The Bush Garden*. (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 220.

Mythologically, although the force of this question still obtains; practically, for many new Canadians, "here" has become the place from which they can write (or make films) about their cultures of origin. See "The State of Contemporary Canadian Literature," by David Staines. Unpublished paper presented to the Nordic Association for Canadian Studies at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, 1996.

11. "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," by bell hooks, in *Framework* 36. (London, 1989), p.23

12. Think of Marilyn from "Northern Exposure" or Elsie in "North of 60".

13. *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*, by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. (London, Heinemann, 1972), p.4



Four stills from *Rude*

The conquering lion



Maxine



Reece



Rhetorical imagery



Parodic authority in *Masala*



Inadequate authority in *Nobody Waved Goodbye*



Rita and Roxan in *Eldorado*

in part, the migratory communities that constitute, increasingly, a large part of the cultural life of Montreal, including the thoroughly assimilated anglophone minority. There has also been the Italian-Québécois work of Paul Tana with his *Café Italia, Montréal* (1985) and *La Sarrasine* (1992), along with the important Italian references in both of Jean-Claude Lauzon's features, *Un zoo la nuit* (1987) and *Léolo* (1992).

Most impressive, however, is Charles Binamé's *Eldorado*—partly because of all the elements it has in common, quite serendipitously, with Clement Virgo's *Rude*. Made in 1995, both films have dirty-talking dee-jays that help link the different stories; both narrate themselves more through mosaic than linear strategies; and both deal with an underclass that inhabits the streets at night of the once homogenous, supposedly secure, foundation cultures of Toronto and Montreal.

Collectively written and improvisationally executed, *Eldorado* demonstrates that you don't have to be an immigrant to be an outcast. Even the well-healed young woman, Roxan (Isabel Richer), using her father's money to do good works for the sick and underprivileged, lives as if in drag within this derelict world. She adopts as her ward (and hoped-for lover?) the thieving, drug-dealing Rita (Pascale Bussi res, in the most astonishing performance of her career) and distributes small change to a couple of winos who, clumsily, attempt to rape her.

Eldorado depicts the inherited alienation of a *pure laine* culture that's beginning to unravel, that's beginning to trouble the easy confidence of what it means, in the 1990s in Montreal, to be Qu b cois—whatever one's language of birth.

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.

—Frantz Fanon¹⁴

Of all the films made from whatever culture in whichever language, however, the most challenging and, imaginatively, the most daring is Clement Virgo's *Rude*.¹⁵ A low budget feature produced through the Canadian Film Centre in Toronto, the film draws upon the same arsenal of rhetorical imagery as did Virgo's previous short film, *Save My Lost Nigga Soul* (1993). This imagery obviously derives from Rastafarian culture; and even if the specificities of such references seem closed to other-culture viewers, many of their implications are at least partly familiar from Christian iconography.¹⁶

In virtually every scene in the film, expressive murals are everywhere—as much in the boxing gym as in the stairwell where drugs are dealt. Most directly an element of narrative is Luke's personal wall, placed prominently within the precincts of Regent's Park—one of Toronto's most notorious diasporic ghettos. Begun before Luke (Maurice Dean Wint) was sent to prison and left untouched during the

time he was away, the wall serves as metonym for Luke's uncertain existence—his life constantly in the process of self-creation, reclaiming personal agency by performing his black identity not through criminal but through artistic behaviour.

Set during an Easter weekend, the film is framed by Rude herself (Sharon M. Lewis)—a rap talking, radio artist and phone-in host whose voice serves as choric comment throughout the film. Over the opening shot of a lion coming directly towards us—a lion whom Rude names as “the conquering lion of Judah”, Rude's voice establishes an apocalyptic tone:

It's Easter weekend and like every year at this time I come to you by the last neighborhood in the world—pirate radio. The signal stretches from the land of the Zulu-Zulu nation all the way to the land of the Mohawk nation; and for the next two nights we'll steal Babylon's airwaves and let them re-evaluate their immigration policy.... Sharpen your spears, throw stones: the *coup d' tat* has begun.

As in *Soul Survivor*, the host city is designated Babylon;¹⁷ and throughout the film, black Canadian culture is seen as invasive of aboriginal cultures but at the invitation of other people—the anglofranco management that used to constitute Canada. The film has a classical three-part structure: presentation, complication, and (at least for some) redemption—a resolution of the problems that have occurred.

Basically, there are also three stories—the story of Luke (known in drug circles as General), a reformed dealer, his wife, Jessica (Melanie Nicholls-King) and their son, Johnny (Ashley Brown). Secondly, there is Maxine (Rachael Crawford), a window dresser, and the devastation caused by her decision to abort a pregnancy by someone with whom she appears to have been in a sexually exploitative relationship. Finally, there is Jordan (Richard Chevolleau), a young boxer who, within the gay-bashing world in which he moves, nevertheless finds himself romantically drawn to Curtis (Junior Williams), his equally young trainer. Also prominent in Luke's life is Yankee (Stephen Shellen), the film's white drug lord and iniquitous authority figure, and Reece (the ubiquitous Clark Johnson), Luke's brother who has been looking after his family while Luke has been away.

Mosaic in structure (as I have said), these stories less interact with one another than bounce against one another—Virgo often moving his camera as if from one set to another, suggesting parallels, creating a narrative collage.

Given the “irrationality” of the imagery (could such murals really exist in the sites in which we see them?) and of Rude's interior self-projections (does the lion actually inhabit the project and move at times from room to room?), critics might be tempted to refer to a Caribbean-Canadian magic realism, except that the term is completely powerless to convey the ritualistic authority of the film. Virgo has created a hyperrealist text in which every element within it is as important as every other element—the imagery as much as the characters, the characters no more than the sounds.

Like the voice of Rude, the music operates sometimes as alternative text, more frequently as comment on the action. When Maxine is justifying her need for an abortion, we hear the *a cappella* plangency of "Four the Moment" singing *Farther Along*: "Cheer up my sister, All bye and bye. ... Tempted and tried, we're not made to wander. All bye and bye." Associated with Luke at least twice in the film are the well-known lyrics of Jimmy Cliff's *Many Rivers to Cross*: "Many rivers to cross, But I can't seem to find my way over ..."

This theme is taken up by Luke in his final confrontation with his brother. Reece has been humiliated, both by Yankee (who called him a chimpanzee) and by Jessica (whom he had obviously been looking after in affectionate as well as in practical ways). "When are we gonna grow up, Reece?", he says. "When are we gonna become men?" Becoming who they want to be, of finding their way over the river, is the challenge of every character in the film.

Along with the lion that accompanies Rude's choric comments, there are also time-lapse sequences of Babylon's cityscapes, as on Good Friday evening, the sun races to set and on Easter morning it races to rise again. The time-lapse cinematography suggests that this three-day weekend represents a lifetime of struggle towards salvation or defeat; and if the Christian imagery is in itself insufficiently explicit, Rude, for the first time with her face clearly visible, consolidates the film's final rhetoric of redemption:

It's Easter Sunday morning and the sun is rising, the sun has risen and the mothership is leaving. Our Majesty has forgiven us and our sins are washed away. We just heard trumpets disguised as gunshots, signaling us home. So all abroad the mothership for those that want a chance at—rebirth.

As the film presents them to us, Luke and his family are the most privileged for a chance at rebirth. Jordan and Maxine have discovered important truths about themselves, but we leave them in a greater state of tentativeness, although Maxine's spirit child whom she has not permitted to live is finally holding out her hand, as if in acceptance of her own non-existence. As for Reece, he may have sacrificed himself so that Luke might go free.

People have found it hard to live without the personal landmarks they recognize. They can't say, 'Look, this is where it happened.' Now they have no means to the past except through memory. Increasingly unable to remember, they have begun to invent.

—Jeanette Winterson.¹⁸

The above account fails to do justice to the imaginative authority of the film or to its stylistic diversity. Nor has it dealt with the film's extraordinary tenderness—in the scenes between Jordan and Curtis as they discover their attraction to one another; or between Luke and Johnny and Luke and Jessica—even between Jessica and Reece, of whom she has obviously been very fond. Or the extraordi-

nary sensuality of Maxine resisting then surrendering to her lover and his video camera.

Although all the films discussed in this article are culturally interesting and often enormously accomplished, *Rude* as much goes beyond the stylistic eclecticism of post-modern texts as it transcends the sociological instances of the current post-colonial.¹⁹ Having recently completed *The Planet of Junior Brown*, a Christmas television special for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Virgo has decided to step back a bit and, as with Atom Egoyan and *The Sweet Hereafter*, to deal with the work of other writers than himself.²⁰ *Rude* remains, however, as both a cultural watershed and an imaginative promise—in my view, the crowning achievement of the new Canadian cinema.

Contemporary Canadian cinema has been enriched enormously by the greater variety of voices that are now speaking within it. The current cinema of cultural diversity has extending the range of the Canadian canon, expanding both its political and expressive potentialities.²¹

If Canadian cinema has always been a marginal cinema—as indeed are all national cinemas in comparison with the Hollywood entertainment machine—it has become an international cinema. By becoming more diversified, our margins are now of greater interest to other nations—especially in Europe.

In spite of economic setbacks, Canadian cinema, in whichever language from whatever culture and in whatever mode, has never had such an assured place in the world.

Peter Harcourt has retired from Carleton University and is the author of A Canadian Journey—Conversations With Time.

14. *Black Skin, White Masks* (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952), by Franz Fanon (trans. by Charles Lam Markmann). (New York, Grove Press, 1967), pp.17-18

15. For an informative review of the film, see "Where Zulus Meet Mohawks: Clement Virgo's *Rude*," by Marc Glassman, *Take One*, Fall 1995, pp.16-21

16. For a concise account of Rastafarian history and beliefs, see *Rastafari & Reggae*, by Mieke Björk (1996)

<<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/6374/Rasta.html>>. Ethiopia was believed to have been the site of the Garden of Eden and of the promised land of the future. "It was out of this rich tradition of love for Ethiopia that the Rastafarian faith was born. Marcus Garvey predicted about a black King and when Ras Tafari Makonnen of Ethiopia was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie I, King Of Kings, Lord Of Lords, Conquering Lion Of The Tribe Of Judah, 225th restorer of the Solomonic Dynasty, many Jamaicans claimed the prophecy of Garvey had been fulfilled."

17. Traditionally the site of exile, a Rasta glossary offers a further definition of Babylon: "Corrupt society, government and institutions, as an oppressive force; the police, as agents of." See Ras Rohaj's *Reggae Supersite* (1996) <<http://www.reggaesupersite.com/index.html>>.

18. *Art & Lies*, by Jeanette Winterson. (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 1994), p.44

19. For an account of the film that refuses the Rasta references and, indeed, most of the film's artistry, see *Black Like Who?* by Rinaldo Walcott, (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 1997), pp.53-69

20. Adapted from the novel by Virginia Hamilton, *The Planet of Junior Brown* is co-written by Clement Virgo and Cameron Bailey

21. And there are, of course, even more voices speaking out within video and documentary.



SOUTH

This article grows out of an introductory communications course where students were asked to undertake a structural analysis of Bruce McDonald's *Highway 61* (1991). The film is easy fodder for a classic structural analysis given the radical juxtapositions it presents between the pristine rural Canadian north and the decayed urbanized American south. However, I wanted the assignment to uncover not simply the oppositional structure of the film but the way such oppositions are complicated by the film. As I will attempt to show in what follows, *Highway 61* represents the border where cultural oppositions between American and Canadian cultures come to take on meaning.

Highway 61 Revisited

by Chris Byford



So much film scholarship in Canada has, and continues to be premised on a series of binary oppositions—centre/margin, loser/hero, masculine/feminine, victim/victimizer—each of which is informed by the central opposition of Hollywood Cinema/Canadian Cinema. The study of Canadian film has embodied two opposing views: on the one hand, there is a belief that Canadian cinema is potentially emancipatory in its ability to bind vast expanses together through the delivery of a shared and authentic vision of Canadian culture. On the other hand, there is a view of Canadian cinematic culture as one of technological dependency on the American film system, as the “locus of human domination both in terms of a dependent political economy and a concomitant loss of cultural heritage.”¹ Thus, by embodying the two polar views of cinematic technology as at once liberating in its evocation of a shared Canadian cultural identity and harmful in its implantation of American ideology, the study and theorization of Canadian cinematic culture has tended to operate on a rather grand and abstract level. The two competing perspectives of technological dependency and technological humanism leaves us between the dystopian and utopian sensibility.

Another approach has been suggested by Jose Arroyo who has argued that Canadian film scholars should not “avoid American cinema [or popular culture in general] but examine its role in Canada from a Canadian perspective. To study Canadian cinema in isolation from Canadian cinematic culture can at best result in a partial understanding.”² Arroyo’s insight is important especially in the context of the globalizing media and the cultural diasporas that make up Canada’s cultural landscape. An analysis of Canadian Cinema can no longer assume that such a category is simply transparent and static but must be located in the context of a “Canadian cinematic culture.” To take such a context into account means asking questions about popular culture in Canada, it means acknowledging that this culture is largely American. This does not signal an end to Canadian film scholarship but rather it brings another dimension, a complexity, to the analysis of Canadian cinema. *Highway 61* interests me first and foremost because it is a film that is very popular with Canadian youth (certainly with most of the students I have shown it to). The film’s distinctly Canadian popularity is, somewhat paradoxically, the result of its incorporation of American popular music. Before moving on to an analysis of the film, I wish to turn very briefly to the original Canadian road movie, Don Shebib’s *Goin’ Down the Road* (1970).

1. Arthur Kroker, *Technology and The Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant*. Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1984, 14.

2. Jose Arroyo, “Bordwell Considered.” *cineACTION!* (28, 1992), 87.

Oh God said to Abraham “kill me a son”
 Abe said “man you must be puttin me on”
 God said “no”, Abe said “what”
 God say “you can do what you wanna but
 the next time you see me comin you better run”
 Well Abe said “where d’you want this killin done”
 God said “out on Highway 61”
 Well Georgia Sam he had a bloody nose
 welfare department wouldn’t give him no clothes
 They asked poor Howard where can I go
 Howard said “there’s only one place I know”
 Sam said “tell me quick man I got to run”
 Oh Howard just pointed with his gun
 and said “that way down Highway 61”
 Well Mack the finger said to Louie the king
 “I got 40 red white and blue shoestrings
 and a thousand telephone that don’t ring.
 Do you know where I can get rid of these things?”
 and Louie the king said “let me think for a minute son”
 Then he said “yes I think it can be easily done
 Just take everything down to Highway 61”
 Now the 5th daughter on the 12th night
 told the first father that things weren’t right
 “my complexion”, she says, “is much too white”
 He said “come here and step into the light”
 He said “hmm you’re right let me tell
 the 2nd mother this has been done”
 But the 2nd mother was with the 7th son
 and they were both out on Highway 61
 Now the roving gambler he was very bored
 trying to create a next world war
 He found a promoter who nearly fell off the floor
 He said “I never engaged in this kind of thing before
 But yes, I think it can be very easily done
 We’ll just put some bleachers out in the sun
 and have it on Highway 61”

—Lyrics from Bob Dylan’s *Highway 61 Revisited*

The Loser Paradigm

The most pervasive approach in Canadian film studies has been the "loser paradigm." The loser paradigm, epitomized by the characters of Joey and Pete in *Goin' Down the Road*, has, in a recent book on Canadian popular culture, been conceptualized as being in direct opposition to the "Hollywood model of holy heroism" promoting "losing as a distinctive national right (if not rite), thus helping to distinguish Us [Canadians] from Them [Americans]." ³ As Peter Morris has pointed out, *Goin' Down the Road* has become something of an icon of English Canadian cinema in that "its theme, style and characters have been constantly used as points of reference in discussions of the characteristics of Canadian cinema."⁴

Indeed *Goin' Down the Road* was and continues to be the barometer of Canadian difference for many film theorists and critics:

Pete and Joey can only try to escape further to the west, but the film makes clear that escape is an illusion. This illusion is the *American dream*, the notion that 'success' is freely open to all, on which modern consumer society thrives but which is shown to be in total contradiction to Canadian reality.⁵

...from Richard Benner's *Outrageous!* to Michel Brault's *Les ordres*, Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road*, Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Good-bye* and further back.... With their particular form of narrative construction, rejection of studio shooting and use of actual events (historic and personal), they are thinly veiled documentaries, portraits of real people living in a recognizable world, *as remote from the celluloid fantasies of Hollywood's Luke Skywalker and Superman as can be imagined.* ⁶

A year after Hollywood was alerted to the extent of anti-establishment sentiment by the maverick success of *Easy Rider*, a Canadian shot a seminal road-movie-as-national-metaphor. Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* ('70) also featured a pair of monosyllabic ramblers, Pete and Joey (Doug McGrath and Paul Bradley). But while boasting *Easy Rider*'s despair quotient, it was vigorously void of the U.S. film's martyred romanticism. The symbolic function of Shebib's road had less to do with knowledge or transcendence than with the literal *myth*-in the now quaintly outmoded sense of *falsehood*-of attainable social improvement. ...Canadian film's drama of alienation is not mere cultural mopeiness but a rejection of a core Hollywood myth. Instead of a scenario in which all obstacles to individual fulfilment can be transcended by force of will (and muscle), we have even the smallest flickers of potential insurrection being snuffed out by dominant social forces. ...Our alienation is a political stance. ⁷

What is problematic in these passages is a fundamental ontology that permeates the way the film is discussed in terms of its authentic representation of place. *Goin' Down the Road*'s documentation of failure is seen as an antidote to

American cultural imperialism. The omnipresent notion here is that if the oppositional tendencies of Canadian cinema could somehow be conceptualized as a generic form, then a truly independent form of self-expression might be possible after all. The problem is however complicated by the conceptualization of the medium itself as an invasive technology that has penetrated the Canadian psyche and filled it with a distinctly American ideology. This penetration can only be countered via a content (loser versus hero; silent stoicism versus heroic rhetoric; etc.) that is more authentic, more representative of the Canadian experience. In short, the loser constitutes an identity in the face of American cultural imperialism.

According to Christine Ramsay, *Goin' Down the Road* occupies a central place in Canadian film scholarship not because it is about losers but because it exemplifies "an empathetic engagement with marginality."⁸ While Ramsay's comparison of the construction of nation with the construction of masculinity is compelling, I believe that Shebib's film is so full of gross stereotypes and misinformation that it cannot be emblematic of any form of marginality be it exiled Maritimers and/or emasculated working class men. Take for example the scene where Pete applies for a job with an advertising firm because he has seen several commercials and "enjoyed them." If we feel empathy for Pete during his interview at the firm, it is largely a result of the absurdity of the situation and not because it reveals a truism of marginality. This scene is so absurd that it provided perfect material for an SCTV parody where Pete (played by John Candy) says that he and Joey (played by Joe Flaherty) are heading west to Toronto to get "some of them doctorin' and lawyerin' jobs!" It is important to remember that parody is related to burlesque in its application of a serious style to a ridiculous subject and not the other way around. In other words, it is not a question of SCTV ridiculing a serious subject but of amplifying an already ridiculous idea through mimicry.

Indeed, to posit that a Maritimer with Pete's background would be so gullible as to travel to Toronto in search of such a position is to insult the intelligence of all such migrant workers within Canada. This is not to say that workers from the Atlantic provinces have not and do not continue to travel west to more economically prosperous regions such as Southern Ontario and in search of gainful employment. But to posit that they would apply for a position that they are woefully unqualified for, as Shebib's film does, is to simply prop up a massive stereotype for ridicule, suggesting that a Nova Scotian labourer is either rather dense or quite delusional. The empathy one feels for Pete during this scene or during his date with Nicole who works at the bottling plant (or his encounters with the woman in the classical record store or the woman reading the book on the island) is an empathy one feels for an individual who is making a fool out of himself rather than for someone who is victimized by class and regional differences delineated through a concrete analysis. They are, in their very absurdity, simply humiliating situations that offer little or no analysis of class or of the construction of masculinity unless we are willing to take this

gross caricature of a working class Nova Scotian for either the machinations of "dominant social forces" or a "failed construction of masculinity."

Ramsay's suggestion that Pete and Joey are used to "display differences between the 'strong and cohesive' Canadian imagined community from the perspective of the margins"⁹ is unconvincing. This is so not only because Shebib doesn't even know where the margin is¹⁰ but also because of the mistaken conflation of "imagined community" with nation, something that Ramsay gets from Benedict Anderson. As Leslie Armour has pointed out the "common confusion about the 'nation' is the result of a tendency to think of the nation as if it were the community or a culture.... Hence the tendency for communities and cultures to be homogenous is mistaken for some resultant necessity in the nation."¹¹ Anderson's definition of the nation as an "imagined community"¹² does not take account of the way films and electronic media cross and confuse borders—the presence of the American media in the Canadian media. The notion of an "imagined community" creates a misleading homogeneity of cultural identification

3. Greig Dymond and Geoff Pevere, *Mondo Canuck*. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall Canada Inc. 1996, 67.

4. Peter Morris. *The Film Companion*. Toronto: Irwin Publishing. 1984, 130.

5. James Leach, "Second Images: Reflections on the Canadian Cinema(s) in the Seventies." *Take Two*. ed. Seth Feldman. Toronto: Irwin Publishing. 1984, 106 (italics mine).

6. Piers Handling, "A Canadian Cronenberg." *Take Two*. ed. Seth Feldman. Toronto: Irwin Publishing. 1984, 81 (italics mine).

7. Geoff Pevere, "Letter from Canada." *Take One* (1993), 63.

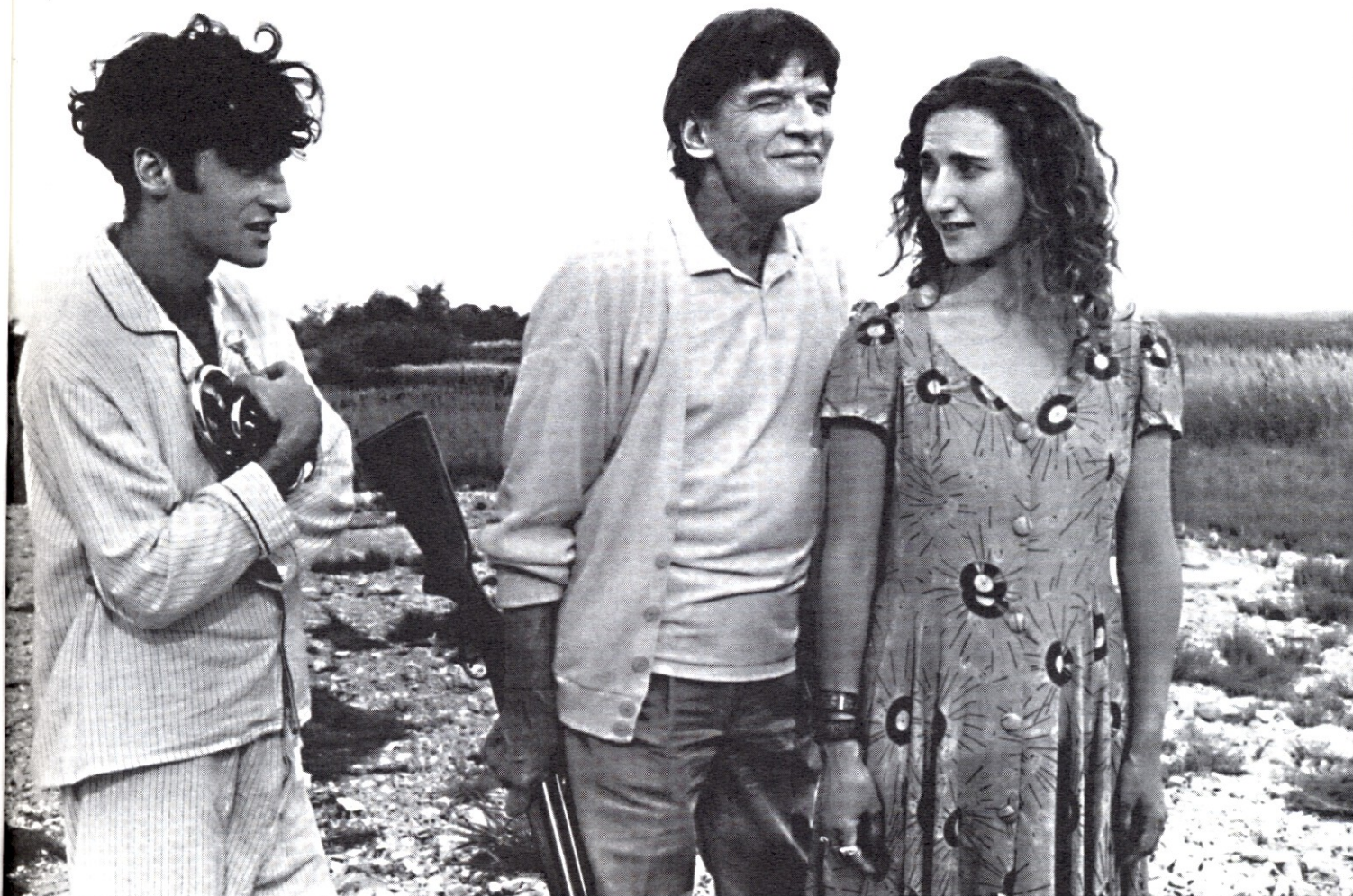
8. Christine Ramsay, "Canadian Narrative Cinema from the Margins: 'The Nation' and Masculinity in *Goin' Down The Road*." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* (Volume 2 Nos. 2-3, 1993), 45.

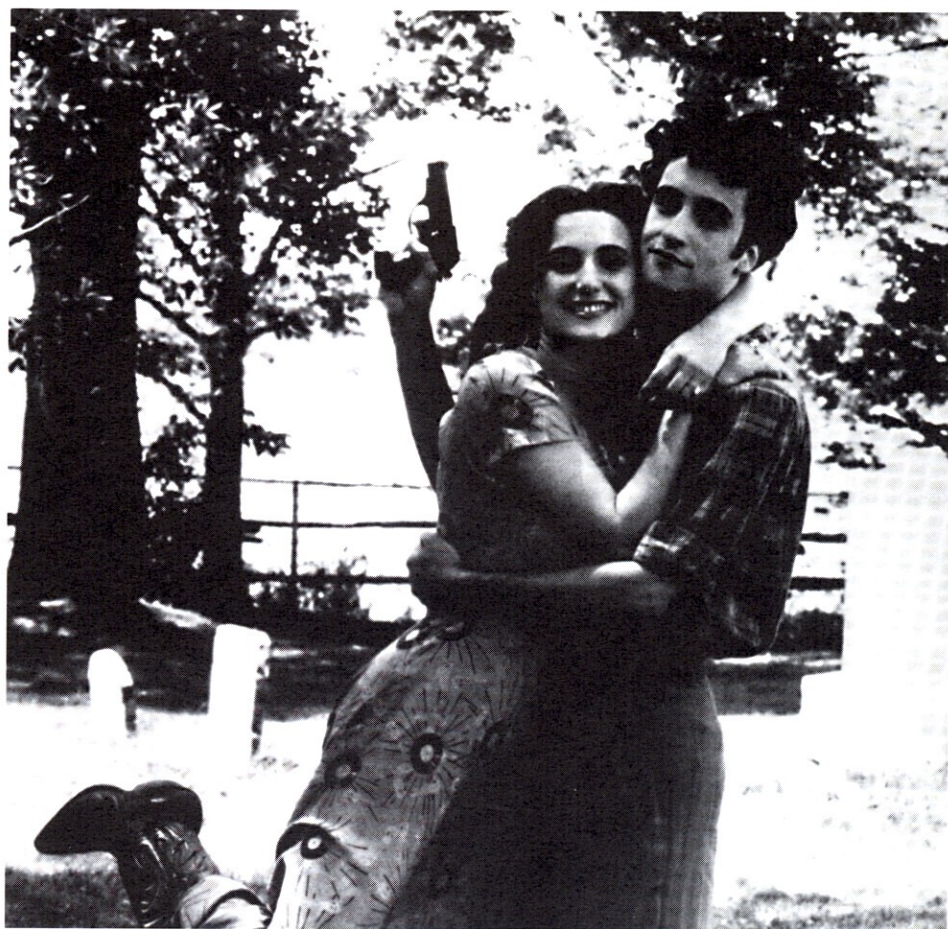
9. Ramsay, 41.

10. As Ramsay herself points out Shebib refers to Pete and Joey in an interview in 1973 as "Newfies" an error which she says "reveals his [Shebib's]...lack of belief and faith in the metaphoric strength and cohesiveness of the Canadian imagined community. (41)" I would suggest that Shebib's error is borne out a complete disregard for his character's origins and the reasons for their consequent marginality. How can his characters be representative of a marginal perspective if the margin is so broad as to include anyone east of Quebec?

11. Leslie Armour, *The Idea of Canada and the Crisis of Community*. Ottawa: Steel Rail Publishing. 1981, 139.

12. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. Revised Edition. London and New York: Verso. 1991, 6.





within the boundaries of a nation state.¹³ This is not terribly surprising given that Anderson's work concerns the origins of nationalism in the pre-globalized pre-transnational world of the nineteenth century. It is also problematic because it is dependent upon the idea that dominant/popular systems of representation will create an ontological reality where nationalism is the primary form of identity (such as the *Leatherstocking Tales* novels of James Fenimore Cooper where nationalistic brotherhood transcends racial prejudice). In other words, it is dependent upon an analysis of media content versus the medium itself. A reliance on content, on the power of representation, suggests that the provision of an authentic indigenous content can counter the way in which American media address spectators, whether in Toronto or Liverpool, as Americans. While the question remains as to what counts as authentic indigenous content, it should be painfully obvious by now that no amount of indigenous representation (no matter how gloomy and anti-heroic) can overcome the entrenched problems of monopoly ownership of communication technologies such as film exhibition and distribution.

The work of Harold Innis is far more appropriate than Anderson's for thinking about cultural nationalism in a North American context. Innis's analysis of the dualities of the centre/margin in a North American staples economy transcends a simple binarism. In her recent and important article on

Innis and the concept of the margin, Jody Berland maintains that according to Innis the American newspaper exerts influence and control not by its content but rather by its mode of production:

Through newspapers, the centre seeks to maintain power over the margins: through productive relationships (wherein manufactured goods are exchanged for raw materials), through the dissemination and influence of a particular mode of knowledge, and through the monopolising ideology of the freedom of the press. Thus the production of American industry (i.e., the production of a centre) cannot be separated from the production of a staples based economy in Canada (the margin), and the dialectical relationship which arose between them and produced them both is economic, technological, spatial and cultural at the same time.¹⁴

Innis's work is concerned with relationships between certain entities of production; the margin and its relation to the centre is more complex than the centre's relation to the margin as a homogenizing force that is absolutely and necessarily in opposition to the ostensible heterogeneity/difference as represented by the margin.

His *oeuvre* offers, as Kroker describes it, "an epistemological toolkit for the exploration of dependency and emancipa-

tion as the two faces of technological society."¹⁵

In his *Bias of Communication* Innis says that in "Western civilization a stable society is dependent upon an appreciation of a proper balance between the concepts of space (territory) and time (duration)."¹⁶ Societies then exist in two dimensions in a relation of reciprocity: time and space. This is particularly important in relation to Canada and cinematic technology as the implication is that as global or long distance communication improves local or short distance communication deteriorates. As communication improves over long distances there is a concomitant shift of the location of authority to more distance, diffuse and abstract centres. But Innis' views of the relation between time and space are not simply those between one type of culture and another but rather they are emblematic of the very tensions and contradictions that Innis had found *within* the Canadian historical situation. His position is important to consider when analyzing Canadian film in that it is one that is midway between the utopian and the dystopian and offers neither a "veneration of ... 'margin' [n]or 'centre'."¹⁷ In other words, whether one is considering the construction of national identity or other universal constructs such as masculinity, these cannot simply be conceptualized in terms of an abstract "impulse to mastery."¹⁸ That they do represent this impulse is without question but if they are only conceptualized in these terms, the processes which give them shape, which shape them differently in different social contexts (i.e., masculinity as inflected by class, race and nationality/regional) cannot be specified and therefore cannot be acted upon. Dialectics involves more than either a celebration of the 'good' but ineffectual margin or the 'bad' but forceful centre. What needs to be specified is the manner in which forms of domination are carried out and/or resisted in particular cultural, social and natural settings and locales. To claim that *Highway 61* is the ultimate manifestation of the struggle between time and space or centre and margin would be ridiculous of course. Rather I wish to submit that it is a very modest film that has much to tell us about the relation between communications technologies and the cultures of place. It's an entertaining ride that offers an interesting view of Canadian and American culture via a representation of their respective concrete and metaphorical territories and the borders between them.

Highway 61: A Cultural Approach

In *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), David Harvey reminds us that it is not only *real* but also *metaphorical* spaces of power that are "sites of innumerable differences that have to be understood both in their own right and within the overall logic of capitalist development."¹⁹ Unlike Shebib's film, *Highway 61* continuously delineates both real (the actual physical highway) and metaphorical (the diegesis) spaces of power, including how the former are transformed into the latter through a dialectical juxtaposition of spaces, places, dialogue, popular music, ideologies and communications technology.

The film opens in the Canadian town of Pickerel Falls, where a young man named Pokey Jones operates a barber

shop and hangs out with his friend Claude. One day he discovers a frozen body in a bathtub out in the shop's backyard. Shortly after, a girl named Jackie Bangs wanders into town and claims that the dead body is her brother, in actuality she needs the corpse to smuggle stolen drugs into the United States. She meets Pokey, who as discoverer of the body has made the front page of the local paper, and talks him into driving her and her "brother" to New Orleans where she ostensibly wants to bury him. They strap the coffin to the roof of Pokey's car and hit the road for New Orleans with Mr. Skin (aka Satan), a character who believes that he owns the deceased's soul, in hot pursuit.

The border between us and them, the Americans, is horizontal, strung out across the 49th parallel. Its status as a dividing line is foregrounded in the film by the actual border crossing station where two strange American border guards interrogate Pokey and Jackie. The male guard played by the former lead singer of the Dead Kennedys and counter-culture 'bad-boy' Jello Biafra, says to Jackie who has a criminal record that she can do anything she wants in the "privacy of [her] own home" but "not in my house." It is a particular construction of place that can neither be put forth as false nor genuine. Although Benedict Anderson's conflation of community and nation is problematic in its homogeneity, his understanding that places cannot be distinguished in the realms of discourse "by their falsity/genuineness but by the *style* in which they are imagined" is, as David Harvey points out, important.²⁰ This imagined conception of the nation as a 'house' has obvious allusions to an exclusionary nationalist rhetoric. The irony here is that it is the Canadian, Jackie, who is being stereotyped as the violent interloper when in fact the reverse is often more common. Indeed, most moral panics about the influence of American cultural products on indigenous cultures has been accompanied by a sense of terror at the elimination of spatial barriers. It is typical of the way American culture has often been targeted as the malevolent other; the ubiquitous and insidious force that creeps into other cultures watering them down and rendering them less authentic.

In the film this arbitrary horizontal border is further foregrounded when Pokey writes to his friend Claude, "You notice a big change as soon as you cross the border." This change is delineated in a striking fashion. The landscape of birch trees, rugged Canadian shield outcrops and huge pines that dwarfed the car on the Canadian side of the border are juxtaposed to shots of a tattered American flag, burnt out

13. John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, 83.

14. Jody Berland, "Space at the Margins: Colonial Spatiality and Critical Theory After Innis." *Topia* (no. 1, Spring 1997), 64.

15. Kroker, 18.

16. Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951, 62.

17. Kroker, 99.

18. Christopher Faulkner quoted in Ramsay, 47.

19. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 355.

20. David Harvey, "From space to place and back again: Reflections on the condition of postmodernity." *Mapping the Futures*. eds. Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, George Robertson and Lisa Tickner. New York and London: Routledge, 1993, 16.

buildings, and construction cranes on the American side. It is not the epitome of the American dream but a place of decay and growth that is in stark contrast to the picturesque stasis of Pickerel Falls. To emphasize the transition between the two spaces, the Ramone's *Do You Remember Rock n' Roll Radio* blares as the camera appears to pass through the car itself²¹, which seems to suggest that the actual personal space of the car and the geographical space of Highway 61 are also part of a larger metaphorical space. The song's lyrics—"We need change, we need it fast; Before rock's just part of the past; Cause lately it all sounds the same to me; Oh, oh; Will you remember Jerry Lee, John Lennon, T. Rex and Ol' Moulyty?"—look to the history of rock, a history that is alluded to by Pokey when in another of his postcard asides he explains to Claude that "When you travel south on 61 from Thunder Bay to New Orleans, what you're really doing is tracing the history of popular music back to its roots." Highway 61 stretches 'from the Lakehead to the Big Easy' and thus parses North America and its horizontal border on a vertical axis. It suggests an imagined sense of place that is neither exclusively Canadian nor American. Instead it is a mythological place²² signified through Pokey's and the song's concern with remembering the history, continuity, and permanence of rock n' roll.

At the very beginning of the film as the title appears to move from back to front, there is a cut to a series of red, white and blue lines moving through the frame accompanied by the sound of a trumpet in the distance. This snippet of whirling red, white and blue turns out to be the barber pole in front of Pokey's shop. The connotations are quite clear: the symbol of America, its flag, are shown to exist at least in an encapsulated form in the very heart of the Canadian Shield. This idea is reinforced as Pokey turns on his radio to listen to that quintessentially American form of music, jazz. The source of Pokey's desire to run off and play jazz is made manifest. Indeed, unlike Shebib's film the central character's place of origin is made clear and, also unlike Shebib's film, the media influences from the centre are explicit and explicitly filled with contradictions: the romantic mythology and hegemony of American Jazz, of black popular culture, in rural Canada. In *Highway 61*, American culture is not simply a colonizing force but a force that blends and is transformed by its context of reception.

The conversation that takes place next introduces a sense of the influences and the uses of American popular culture within this particular context. Pokey tells his friend Claude that he doesn't think his trumpet playing would fit very well into Claude's Bachman Turner Overdrive (BTO) cover band. Claude responds by saying that they not only play BTO but also Metallica and Guns n' Roses as well. The performative, the covering of Canadian and American songs by a local band sheds some light on the processes of popular cultural reception which in this instance is not simply passive consumption but active and creative appropriation. In *The Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hogarth described the appropriation of primarily American popular songs by working class Brits. Hogarth points out that if the "candy-floss world" of those songs were an indication of the way in which working class people and others actually perceived their own world, then matters would

have reached a depressing state.²³ Hogarth reminds us that despite the time-space compression that modern modes of communication have brought about, including the distribution and performance of both films and popular music, the context in which they are received and the manner in which they are used impacts upon their meaning. Certainly the fact that Claude's band covers a uniquely Canadian band such as BTO, a band that had its roots in The Guess Who, with a commercially successful (and otherwise bankrupt) band like Guns n' Roses reveals an attempt to delineate a rather hybridized sense of identity.

Highway 61 explores a dialectical relation between centre and margin, between American and Canadian culture. Another example of cultural interaction occurs when Jackie and Pokey visit Otto, the big American superstar rock musician who lives in an opulent mansion with his rock star wife Margo. Not only is the scene a gross (Canadian) stereotype of (American) superstardom with guests shooting their own supper, but McDonald sets up a wonderful irony by having Otto played by Art Bregmann, one of the original 'indie' musicians on the Canadian west coast music scene. Again, this mixing of Canadian and American references, the juxtaposition of American rock star fame with Canadian indie 'fame' is not only playful but also empowering for Canadians who have a familiarity with both local bands and a more international music history. It is empowering because it connects a Canadian music 'scene' to a larger world.

Throughout the film McDonald juxtaposes Canadian music over American landscapes and vice versa. The effect of this is not to undermine an authentic sense of place but to point toward the way in which place is constructed through experience, in this case it is Pokey's trip down the highway. Thus in *Highway 61* the centre is never entirely located because the margin (Pokey) disappears into the open highway. This is why I feel that David Harvey's approach is important. His use of the "Lefebvrian matrix" refuses to see materiality, representation and imagination as separate worlds.²⁴ Simultaneously, Harvey insists that it is only in the social practices of daily life that the ultimate significance of all forms of activity is registered, this is what makes shared meaning possible. The dialectical interplay between experience, perception and imagination is something that *Highway 61* understands quite well. When Pokey writes to Claude that he is "in the middle of the Mississippi Delta, the birthplace of the blues, it's easy to see why; everything's falling apart," the roots of the music are understandable because of the context. The film does not have a utopian notion about finding the authentic or pure form of anything, popular music is shown to jar with and grow in response to its particular context. When Pokey and Jackie encounter the Watson family, made up of a single father with a trio of pubescent daughters who dance to The Archies' *Sugar Sugar*, we see the crassest commercialism at work in American popular music. The song is by a cartoon group that never actually existed and it is part of a routine that the girls are working up to take on tour because as the father says "America's just dying for good family music."

Highway 61, like all good road movies, is also a personal

journey of discovery and development. It is a trip that Pokey has imagined many times:

Pokey: "I never left home, but I know every inch of this highway. I know it inside out. Ask me a question if you like: ask me anything." Jackie: "Do you wanna have sex with me?:" Pokey: "What?" Jackie: "Do you wanna have sex?" Pokey: "No, I'm fine, thank you."

Pokey knows that St. Louis is the home of Miles Davis and Chuck Berry but he doesn't know his own desires. Later, however, when Andre Crouch's gospel song *Can't Nobody do me like Jesus* is played over images of Pokey and Jackie having sex in a church cemetery, there is a creation of contextual meaning within the film through the juxtaposition of visual imagery and music. The message in the cemetery scene is quite clear: while Pokey may know more about a mythical stretch of highway than he does about himself, it is the music, a music that is not his own, that provides us with insight into his passion and personal desires. Experience, perception and imagination all meet here to provide the context, the place, for meaning to arise.

Place bound identities have become more rather than less important in a world of diminishing spatial barriers. They are important because territorial place bound identities cannot only be the basis for the most xenophobic and reactionary exclusionary politics but also for progressive personal and political mobilization. As Jody Berland points out, Harvey's idea that space as a metaphor can sometimes liberate "processes of becoming" means that cultural technologies are able to "shape the material communicative practices which order and enable the production of space — of people, meanings and things in space — as a repository of social meaning and possibility."²⁵ Toward the end of the film Jackie berates Pokey, saying that he's not a musician but "a barber, a small town barber, a Canadian." This is a revelation in some ways for Pokey as it is his barbering skills not his limited musical ones that enable him to get to New Orleans where he meets up with Jackie who has had a change of heart and sends the coffin, drugs and all, into the bayou. And, as the final image of him playing his trumpet demonstrates, one can use popular cultural forms, even if they are not your own, to imagine being someone, something, or somewhere else.

Highway 61 shows us that the point is not to demonize American popular culture but rather to examine its role in the constitution of Canadian culture and identity. After the final credits of the film, Satan tells us that, "everybody has a dream... all its gonna cost you is your soul." The point regarding America as the place one goes to 'sell-out' is at once made clear and rendered facile. It is American popular culture, particularly in the guise of those glitzy commercialized versions which promise the spectacular and end up being of little use, that is the problem. For this devil is not the "Great Satan", the omnipotent imperialist force but an amateur game show host who has home-made pyrotechnics and a microphone on his back porch when he presents the body, strapped to a make-shift "Wheel of Fortune," to his audience of bemused neighbours. Mr. Skin/Satan's visions of power over others are delu-

sions provided by capitalist modernity, via the images proffered by that most commercial of televisual genres, the game show, where one can be transformed by prizes into someone or something much more powerful and important. In the end this comes to make Satan, and not the Canadians (Pokey and Jackie), the loser, the one who has lost his soul.

McDonald's film presents a sweet and allegorical story about personal transformation, about good triumphing over evil, about finding one's home and one's identity while away from home. This is the oppositional structure that informs *Highway 61*. Yet the film also manages to confound this structure, its rich documentary textures complicate the allegorical narrative. McDonald has incorporated real people (especially interesting is the motorcycle gang who need haircuts), the trip is on an actual road that is quite literally signposted. But as the final shot of Claude reading Pokey's last postcard demonstrates, it is also an imagined road. The interaction between real and metaphorical spaces is precisely what gives the film such a powerful sense of place, a sense of borders not a dividing lines but as meeting places: the border between documentary and fiction, between countries, between musical cultures, between life and death.

The dead body which prompted the trip itself is finally laid to rest at the end of the road in New Orleans. As Jackie pushes the coffin out into the water, Pokey stands in the middle of the Bayou playing his trumpet secure in the knowledge that he is no musician but "a small town barber," a "Canadian." The paradox that we are left with is that this scene represents at once the simultaneous fulfilment of his life long dream (or as some critics would put it the 'American dream' which seems to mean any and all forms of success or fulfilment) and the realization that the dream is no longer what he desires. It does not represent loss but the acquisition of knowledge. Jose Arroyo points out that "[p]art of what we have when watching a film is our knowledge of who we are and where we are from and a lifetime of experience watching a cinema that gives us great pleasure without addressing itself to our particular context."²⁶ *Highway 61* makes it quite clear that our particular context always/already includes American popular culture and that is what makes this film, as a site of production, worth revisiting.

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21. The effect, reminiscent of the one in the tower sequence in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), seems to have been achieved by pulling back the lens as the camera, mounted behind the moving car, moves forward.

22. Pokey insists on going off the highway to visit Bob Dylan's "childhood home" in Minnesota where he lived until he was 6 years old. The mythological status of Highway 61, as a venue of flight and fantasy, has already been documented in the lyrics of Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*.

23. Richard Hogarth, *The Uses of Literacy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1957, 191.

24. Harvey 1989, 220-221.

25. Berland, 79.

26. Arroyo, 87.

To Act Is To Be: Identity in Recent Québec Cinema

*« Nous sommes tellement pris avec la convention
du réel, et particulièrement au Québec. »*

-Micheline Lanctôt

by **Jerry White**

Le Confessionale



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Writing about the films of Jean Pierre Lefebvre, Seth

Feldman had noted that his characters seem "to be asking not so much 'Who am I' but 'What part am I being called upon to play?'"¹ The context here is a filmmaker of the 1960s and 70s, but he could well be discussing a recent surge of Québec films that deal explicitly with the futile search for identity. Acting is seen in these films not as a means to an end but as a way of life. Micheline Lanctôt's *Deux Actrices* (1993) continues her interest in female subjectivity, but also deals quite explicitly with the narratives people construct around themselves. Dealing with a woman whose life is interrupted by the appearance of her long lost sister, the film makes it clear throughout just how subjective ideas of "family" and "self" can be. Charles Binamé's *Eldorado* (1995) dives less deeply into a larger pool of characters, but deals with similar strategies that people adopt for putting their best feet forward, as it were. Less so than *Deux Actrices*, whose characters lead very private lives, *Eldorado* uses the unstable landscape of Montréal as an echo of the characters' identity crises. Robert Lepage's *Le Confessionale* (1995) is the most explicitly meta-cinematic of these films, using memories of the filming of Hitchcock's *I Confess* in Québec City as a backdrop to a young man's quest to figure out who he is. All three films posit the understanding of self as akin to the reading of a multi-layered text. *Le Confessionale* visualizes that text in terms specific to a Québec trying to come to terms with its cultural memory. *Deux Actrices* and *Eldorado* are less specific to the cultural situation of Québec, using the fractured, urban setting of Montréal to enunciate the instability of identity. What we see in these films, then, is a vision of Québécois identity in the 90s as something that is fragmented, artificial, and close to cinematic illusion. Some films advocate the breakdown (or deconstruction) of this idea of self, while others see it as a more organic response to a complex world. In all cases, however, it is clear that identity in Québec is not representable as something simple or readily apparent.

The three films under discussion here, like the majority of Québec's cinema of the 80s and 90s, look very much like conventional (if eccentric) narratives, closer to the later films of Denys Arcand than the radical work of Lefebvre. *Deux Actrices* contains the most visible ruptures of realist closure, but even that film has a very linear narrative drive. Similarly, *Le Confessionale* is a fairly linear tale, despite historical digressions (which are rendered in similarly realist narrative style). *Eldorado* is the most straightforward of these three films, despite the large number of characters that Binamé juggles. All three filmmakers, however, manage to create a self-reflexive narrative filmmaking style, with equal emphasis on the words self-reflexive and narrative. This is a significant aesthetic achievement, and should not be downgraded in favor of more engagé traditions of the 60s. Québec filmmaking in the 90s has lost much of the aggressively avant garde qualities that characterized the earlier manifestations of the national cinema. In its place is a more compromised aesthetic that illustrates a clear-headedness that is the natural aftermath of the upheaval (both aesthetic and political) of the Quiet Revolution. The clear headedness of these films is ironic, of

course, since they have as their subject the increasingly fractured nature of identity. Neither Hollywooden nor confrontational, recent filmmaking in Québec is notable for the practicality with which it forms its hybrids. To use a governmental metaphor, these are films enunciating an idea of coalition, as opposed to a hegemony of the vanguard.

I. Some notes on *le postmodern québécois*

What makes these three films especially worth discussing together is that they do not simply enunciate a postmodern, disconnected idea of self, which is a common motif in contemporary literature and film throughout the world. Rather, they each benefit from an understanding of the cinematic, social and political reality of Québec. Many issues around postmodernism are ever-present in the context of Québec, as many of its artists struggle to define themselves in opposition but not utterly unrelated to the dominant, English language (both Canadian and American) culture. This mixture could certainly be thought of as heterogeneous, and the notion of heterogeneity, a central concern of both postmodernism and postcolonialism, is also central to the understanding of cinema in Québec.

Indeed, each of these films deal with issues commonly lumped under "postmodernism." *Deux Actrices* is on the surface a highly postmodern film, using a visually fragmented, heterogeneous style in addition to blurring boundaries between deception and truth, fiction and reality, counter-cinema stylistics and melodrama. *Eldorado* has a similarly postmodern sense to it, having a narrative that refuses to settle on one central character and that deals with people who totally self-consciously construct their identities. *Le Confessionale* deals with a postmodern dissolution of identity and truth, and also draws on a highly fragmented, non-linear narrative structure. Indeed, all three of these films deny the validity of "metanarratives," or set of instructions that conventional (or dominant) culture puts in place to help people make sense of the world. Marie Vautier has identified a lack of faith in these metanarratives in many contemporary Québec novels, writing (in 1991) that "[i]t is certain that in many recently published novels—in Québec as well as in other old colonies—one can note a problematisation of certain metanarratives [métarécits]."² These films gently manipulate (although do not shatter) these récits in a way that is the very portrait of postmodern hybridity. To put it another way, each of these films mix forms and purposes in a way that echoes how their main characters mix identity.

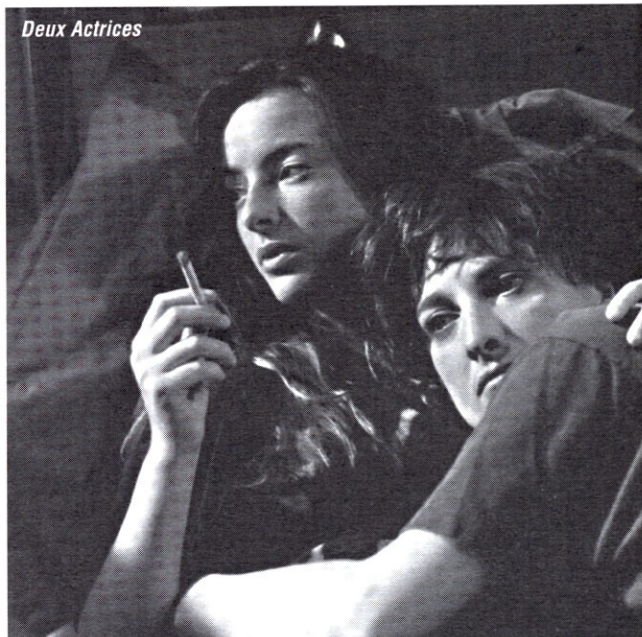
This mixing of cinematic identity is, significantly, an echo of the very institution of Québec film in the shadow of Hollywood. Yves Picard, discussing existence within this shadow, writes that "one question is continuously raised:

1 Seth Feldman, Introduction to Peter Harcourt, "The Old and the New," in Feldman, ed. *Take Two: A Tribute to Film In Canada* (Toronto: Irwin, 1984), p. 169.

2 "Il est certain que dans beaucoup de romans publiés récemment—au Québec autant dans d'autres anciennes colonies—on peut déceler une problématisation de certain métarécits" [translation mine, as are all that follow]. Marie Vautier, "Le Mythe Postmoderne dans quelques romans historiographiques québécois," *Québec Studies*, #12 (Spring 1991), p. 49

being forced to play the card of cinema that attracts an audience, is this commercial Québec cinema that also has personal tendencies in danger of losing its nature, its identity?"³ Québec established a highly distinct filmmaking tradition beginning in the 1960s, owing much to the National Film Board's documentary work (the NFB moved its headquarters to Montréal in 1956) but quickly becoming quite distinct from most work in English Canada at the time. Québec cinema of the 1960s became highly distinct from Classical Hollywood Cinema of that period. Québec cinema's distinct identity became less certain, ironically, when the province began to develop a more complete media environment of its own, which was unsurprisingly modeled after the highly efficient modes of production perfected by Hollywood. What Picard sees Québec cinema as having to do, then, is develop a distinctive voice, but one that can still fit within an identity that has been imported from south of the border. Québec cinema has to pretend to be something that it is not, and therefore is, as he writes, in danger of losing its cinematic distinction, its identity. For filmmakers working in Québec, the difference between what one is and what one must appear to be is ever-present, and it creates a highly heterogeneous sense of identity. The lead characters of all three films try to construct narratives around themselves in hopes of disguising their histories, which are all in one way or another violations of mainstream expectations. Each of these filmmakers also violate mainstream expectations in various ways, and in order to hide that violation, they construct narratives and begin to move towards convention. What each character learns in these films, however, is that it is difficult to keep personal history suppressed, no matter how much one performs in order to disguise it. Similarly, the non-Hollywood "peculiarity," the specificity of Québec cinematic form, is never far below the surface, bubbling to the top in the form of Brechtian video interludes in *Deux Actrices*, a totally de-centered narrative in *Eldorado*, or sets of highly meta-cinematic interludes in *Le Confessionale*.

Vautier's image of the "old colony," however, is extremely important in understanding the "postmodern" aspects of these films. It's too easy to simply call Lanctôt, Binamé and Lepage "postmodern" directors and move on. Vautier, however, sees the preponderance of fragmentation, the revision of métarécits and the rise of "postmodern myths" in contemporary Québec culture as part of the province's attempts to overcome a colonial (and neo-colonial, as during the Duplessis era) history and move towards a fully realized and self-aware nationhood. She writes that "the postmodern myth effects a grand 'sweeping' of that which colonizing countries have taught us of our history."⁴ This sweeping away of a colonial legacy can come in the form of putting aside old and authoritative/authoritarian ways of seeing the world (such as the Classical Hollywood system), in favor of more open and necessarily fragmented modes. These films, then, and their formalist peculiarities, must be seen in the context of a Québec moving towards a possibly statist (possibly federalist) version of postcoloniality, not simply as part of the entire world's move towards a clever, difficult to understand and ultimately



homogenous condition of postmodernism.

Hubert Aquin has fondly recalled the heterogeneous essence of his beloved Montréal in a way that echoes Vautier's discussion of old and new. He writes that "there is no 'new' city. Take, for example, Liège. The old things are all homogenized. The old is not valorized, it is equalized in a way. Even the new things are lacking in contrast." He sets this homogeneity against Montréal, of which he writes that "[m]easure for measure, as I age, Montréal rejuvenates."⁵ What Aquin loves in Montréal, then, is that a real value is placed both on the old and the new, with an understanding that only both, working together, can keep a city from dying, as Liège has.

While postmodernist aesthetics in general are concerned with this kind of difference and hybridity, local identity tends to be erased by such an understanding, in favor of an interest in the supposed inevitability of "globalization" or "post-nationalism." These films resist that kind of simplification, reflecting a reality specific to Québec through their wrestling with the place of difference in a society that has gone from the repression of Duplessis to the freedom and self-discovery of the Quiet Revolution and which must now find its way in a less certain political, social and aesthetic climate. Each of these films are fragmented, but that sense is part of a distinctly local reality. To read them as "postmodern" only begins to explain Lanctôt, Binamé and Lepage's concerns.

II. *Deux Actrices*: Deux femmes se trouvent et se perdent / Two women find themselves and lose themselves

Micheline Lanctôt's film tells the story of Solange (played by Pascale Brüssiers), whose life is disrupted by the sudden appearance of a woman claiming to be her long lost sister Fabienne (played by Pascal Paroissien). The narrative's focus on Brüssiers' relationships, not only with her sister, illustrate how fluid a construction her identity is. This fluidity is echoed by video footage of the actors in rehearsal and discussions, relating their performances to their own lives. The film

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Deux Actrices

is one about laying out the mechanics of the narratives people create, whether personal or cinematic. It is a highly Brechtian construction, although one which, in the best tradition of Brecht, allows equal space for identification and critical distance. No other strategy would do, of course, for Lanctôt understands how powerful these narratives are, and therefore illustrates no phobia of identification common to oppositional film practice. Nevertheless, the aesthetic of *Deux Actrices* is a critical one, and one which draws attention to the puzzle-like nature of so much of the stories that form a vision of "reality."

Lanctôt's film revolves around Solange's various personal relationships, and the way that these relationships are presented illustrates how constructed her identity is. Solange lives a very quiet life as a daycare worker, with a husband in medical school. The first shattering of this illusion of bohemian tranquillity comes with the arrival of Fabienne, but this arrival leads to the revealing of other illusions. Solange admits, for instance, that she only married so her boyfriend could get a student loan. Her relationship with him is, indeed, uneven, and despite the unified front she puts up at parties and with Fabienne, they are in constant danger of splitting apart. She has a similarly strained relationship with her mom, not helped by the fact that she has failed to reveal Fabienne's very existence. Solange's day to day life, then, is evoked by Lanctôt as a very complicated web of illusions,

aspirations, and half-lies. Fabienne's arrival and prolonged stay sometimes turns Solange's life upside down, but at other times seems to have remarkably little effect. Much the same can be said of her fighting with her boyfriend, or even the explosion with her mother. This is expressed by Lanctôt both through the eliciting of extremely restrained performances from Brussiers and Paroissien and a narrative that has numerous peaks and valleys, instead of a build towards a single climax. This emphasis on Solange's interpersonal relationships, then, is echoed by the quotidian character of the narrative's flow: everything has ups and downs, but moves ever onward. This quotidian feeling, however, when it is used to evoke something as earth shaking as the turning up of one's long lost sister, feels inorganic. More exactly, it feels "forced," or "artificial," which is the exact purpose for using this technique to evoke these situations. Interpersonal relationships only work neatly in a realist, invisible narrative, which this is not.

3 "...une question se pose continuellement: à force de jouer la carte de cinéma qui attire, ce cinéma québécois commercial à tendance personnelle est-il en voie de perdre sa nature et son identité?" Yves Picard, "Le cinéma québécois contemporain s'américanise-t-il?" *Cinéma*, 7:3 (Spring 1997), p. 138.

4 "Au Québec, le mythe postmoderne fait un grand 'baylage' de ce que les pays colonisateurs nous ont appris de notre Histoire." Vautier, p. 55.

5 "...il n'y a pas de ville neuve. Exemple: Liège. Le vétusté y a est tout homogénéisé. L'ancien n'est pas valorisé; il se trouve indifférencié, en quelque sort. Même le neuf est dépourvu de vertu contrastante... [à] mesure que je vicillis, Montréal rajeunit." Hubert Aquin, *Blocs erratiques* (Montréal: Quinze Textes, 1982), p. 183-4.

By using relationships as the center of the story and then refusing to make them work neatly, Lanctôt provides a delicious irony. The film feels inorganic and artificial because it is anti-realist, but that very anti-realist character is what makes it organic with the actual subject matter it is evoking, the complexity and unpredictability of human relationships. Because Lanctôt centers the narrative around these relationships, she keeps the film highly focused on this essential paradox: we only feel "real" when we are acting. When the urge towards illusions begins to break down (be it in flattened performances or the revelation that all is not well with the family), things start to look strange. Lanctôt's narrative, then, and the implications of her narrative style, are about how central the idea of acting is to the way we understand the people around us.

Lanctôt also blurs barriers between "reality" and "acting" through the use of video footage of the actors chewing the fat about their performances, their lives, and the points of contact between them. These sequences are the most jarringly anti-narrative part of the film, and in no small part are what distinguish it from a conventional family melodrama. This self-referentiality, aside from being distancing, however, serves as an echo of the subject of the narrative that it is interrupting. The subject of the actors' discussions centers around the personal traumas of the actors, and sometimes veers into how the making of the film is helping them to understand those traumas, or, one might say, those dramas. They are, in short, coming to terms with their identity through the process of acting. These sequences' claim to the status of reality is explicit, by virtue of its frankness about the identity of those on screen as the actors and actresses of the film. Lanctôt complicates this claim, however, by including discussions of fictions of a sort, which are the games that the actors played "in real life," games which echo those of the characters they are playing. The video footage unfolds a miniature meta-narrative, then, similar to but not exactly like that of the film's main narrative. The result is a visually and formally diverse but still coherent film about the way that people form their identities by a process that could quite fairly be understood as "acting." Lanctôt said in a 1993 interview that "the struggle isn't to neatly mix the people with their personas but to create a confusion, where the image of the actor mixes with their cinematic persona."⁶ Indeed, what emerges from this film finally is two narratives that act contrapuntally, that play off of one another to arrive at a single conclusion about the confusion of life in Montréal. Marie Claude Loiselle points out that "Ultimately, it's no longer a question of putting true and false or documentary and fiction up next to each other, but rather to use all the resources of this duality to evoke two 'points of view' of the personas of Solange and Fabienne."⁷ Differences between acting and candid moments are irrelevant for Lanctôt: they're both strategies for making sense of the world.

Très Brecht, one could say, all this insistence on making the viewer aware that these are just characters being played by actors. An important part of a Brechtian aesthetic, however, is that it leaves equal room for critical distance and narrative



pleasure. Too many oppositionally minded filmmakers, in a zeal to create a "counter cinema," or a Brechtian "epic" cinema, have erred on the side of critical distance. Lanctôt, however, uses even the blatantly "critical" part of the film to engage the viewer in a way not dissimilar from what conventional narrative is supposed to do. At the same time, she films the narrative sequences in a way that, while not in themselves self-aware or distanced, often feels less than natural. Her merger of stylistics, then, like her merger of narratives, is quite complete, and Lanctôt has no problem creating narrative pleasure at the same time that she demands an engagement and analysis that is antithetical to the Classical Hollywood ideal. Indeed, Loiselle writes that "Contrary to other films that have already used a similar process... what is exploited here isn't only a distancing effect. It's less necessary to avoid representation than it is to dive in—in fact, to doubly dive in [plonger doublement]—the spectator loses herself in the duplicity of this circuit of images, where the actresses play whenever they are in front of the camera-witness."⁸ Lanctôt illustrates in *Deux Actrices* a very clear understanding of the possibilities of a counter-cinema, one that not so much destroys pleasure, but hints at Laura Mulvey's hope for a "new language of desire."⁹ The narrative pleasure in this film doesn't mean much without a highly developed awareness of its constructedness, but there is space for that pleasure for those who are willing to fully engage in that awareness.

Deux Actrices paints a picture of a group of people defined by acting. In part of the film they are "actual" actors, in another part they are characters who construct elaborate narratives around themselves. The result of this merger, however, is that Lanctôt makes it explicit that the act of acting has much to



Eldorado

do with the way that people come to understand who they are. Her portrait of Montréal is of an unstable place, then, but not an unmanageable one, as her characters do manage to find some happiness in the lives that they lead. This echoes the way that the viewer is allowed narrative pleasure, despite the self-conscious way the film is constructed.

III. *Eldorado*: Il y a plus de personnages que de personnes / More personalities than persons

A more apocalyptic vision of this kind of breakdown can be found, ironically, in a film that much more closely emulates a closed, classical narrative system, Charles Binamé's *Eldorado*. While it could be easily brushed off as a self-indulgent tale of alienated urban hipsters, *Eldorado* shares a lot of these concerns about the constructed nature of people's identities. Binamé's film is far more straightforward than Lanctôt's (no video footage here), although it does feature a less centralized narrative. However, this sprawl does manage to settle on three characters, who have dense narratives surrounding their lives, similar to the constructs that surround Lanctôt's Montréalers. Also like Lanctôt, he makes the most of the urban setting to evoke this chaos. Like *Deux Actrices*, *Eldorado* shows identity to be a highly constructed affair, arrived at only after the most painful and slippery of negotiations, and even then, an entity far from constant.

Although it has a certain adventurous sense to it, *Eldorado* is a fairly easy-to-follow, conventional narrative. The most arresting aspect of its visual style is a propensity towards long

takes; the most unconventional part of the story is that it moves slowly. The film's radical energy comes more from its subject matter: a foul-talking DJ, a young woman with a fairly sordid past, and an eccentric park dweller. Unlike Lanctôt's flattened narrative and docu-video interludes, *Eldorado* has highly dramatic performances and no ruptures in its narrative. This timidity doesn't so much compromise Binamé's dissertation on artificiality and alienation as it does limit it. He

6 "Le but ce n'était pas de mélanger les gens mais de créer une confusion, à l'image de l'acteur qui fusionne avec son personnage au cinéma." Marie-Claude Loiseleur and Claude Racine, "Entretien avec Micheline Lanctôt." *24 Images*, #70 (December 1993/January 1994), p. 10.

7 "Ultimement, il n'est plus question de mettre dos à dos le vrai et le faux, le documentaire et le fiction, mais plutôt d'utiliser toutes les ressources de cette dualité pour faire s'entrechoquer deux 'points de vue' sur les personnages de Solange et de Fabienne." Marie-Claude Loiseleur, "Au-delà du vrai et du faux." *24 Images*, #70 (December 1993/January 1994), p. 4.

8 "Contrairement à d'autres films ayant déjà utilisé un procédé similaire... ce qui est ici exploité n'est acunement un effet de distanciation. Il s'agit moins de nous mettre à l'écart de la représentation que nous y plonger—en fait, de nous y plonger doublement—, le spectateur de perdant dans la duplicité de ce circuit d'images où les actrices jouent tantôt ce qu'elles sont devant le caméra-témoin." Loiseleur, p. 4.

9 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in her *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 16. This essay has of course been a touchstone in feminist film criticism. Less discussed, however, is its usefulness for counter-cinema proponents. *Deux Actrices* is not an explicitly feminist film, but it is useful to invoke Mulvey here because of the way that Lanctôt's film de-centers narrative authority. Mulvey saw that possibility as potentially liberatory for women (who she sees as forever the victim of the masculine, patriarchal gaze of the camera), but Lanctôt here uses it in order to show how elusive centers of all kinds really are and to enunciate the possibilities of coming to terms with that realization.



Le Confessionale

doesn't deal with the relationship of his characters to the medium of film and performance with much in the way of rigor or self-awareness (which is fine, of course, he's under no obligation to do so), and this closed narrative adds a certain force to the statements that he does make. The question of whether to use conventional forms is a constant problem in oppositional film. Binamé has chosen accessibility over adventurism, and while this may not please hard-core Brechtians or counter cinema proponents, it does allow for the possibility of broad appeal. Genre films have long been seen as a potentially useful disguise for progressive or subversive content while still appearing respectably generic. The exact genre that Binamé is using is difficult to pinpoint, however, although there are heavy doses of melodrama and the youth exploitation "slacker film." But while this may be a well-behaved genre film, it uses those conventions to make its wrestling with identity accessible in much the same way that the pleasure allowed by *Deux Actrices* (the *plonge doublement*, as Loiselle calls it) makes it true to the ideal of Brecht. This generic appearance makes for a nice quandary about identity too: just because a film constructs an image or a narrative that resembles a genre doesn't mean there's not something quite different hiding beneath the surface.

The narrative of *Eldorado*, however, is extremely de-cen-

tralized, without a "protagonist" other than a generation of utterly rootless Montréalers. The idea of Binamé's film is that of urban portraiture, a strategy that does not easily lend itself to a coherent, closed narrative. Further, this de-centralization echoes the subject of the narrative: the lack of a clear, central, "real" identity. There is no core to the narrative because there is no real core to the people being narrated. Montréal is seen as an ever-shifting landscape, one with an extremely heterogeneous population and whose only possibility for portraiture is to be in a state of perpetual wandering, which is a fair assessment of the meandering narrative and the often wandering camera and long takes. Appropriately, then, Montréal is also a place where it is not a problem for a racy DJ to create two utterly different personas for himself and base his existence equally in both, or where a woman can hide terrible secrets about her boyfriend in an attempt to construct a "normal" life for herself. A lack of fixity, of stability, both in narrative form and in personal relationships, is seen by Binamé as a defining part of modern life in Montréal.

Binamé evokes the few central characters as people who have constructed elaborate, and often conflicting, narratives around themselves. The DJ is an odd example, for he never lets his persona down, although it is so dramatic and so clearly a product of his livelihood as an actor of sorts that it pre-

sents a bit of a double bind: his life is so constructed that it's no longer clear what it has been constructed around. The woman with whom he has a fling has a less problematic, although still dualistic, sense of self. Her fling with the DJ is also a betrayal of her boyfriend, although she conceals it from him until she discovers she's pregnant and is unsure of the kid's paternity. Her unborn kid's identity, then, embodies a lot of the problems with which Binamé is wrestling: the kid will have to build up his own sense of self, his roots as defined by parentage, or actual lived experience, will be altogether irrelevant. Another woman was recently betrayed by her boyfriend, who, during their trip to Thailand, went to a brothel to have sex with a nine year old boy. The park eccentric whom she befriends is also not all she seems, and the two are paired because both seem to be hiding something. The characters on whom we do settle, then, don't clarify much, and they are evoked and explored with a restlessness and sense of searching that echoes the wandering camera. But rather than bringing these identities to resolution, as one would expect from a linear, closure-oriented narrative, Binamé allows them to remain ambiguous, showing their constructed nature to be not only a terminal problem for this generation of Québécois, but, as the pregnant woman illustrates, perhaps a condition that will carry on for another generation.

Eldorado, then, is about the search for a lost city, a search that is just as hopeless and foolish as the legend that gives the film its title. Montréal, city of gold, is shown by Binamé to be a place of maze-like streets inhabited by maze-like people. That he uses as main characters two actors of sorts—a DJ and a park eccentric—is telling: so many of the people who populate the city are not at all unlike these folks. They are all searching for who they are; and, often failing to find that or not liking what they find, they have to make up something better.

IV. *Le Confessionale*: On peut comprendre le film à travers d'un autre film / You can only understand the film through another film

Robert Lepage's *Le Confessionale* is certainly the most meta-cinematic film under discussion here, for its narrative makes an explicit equation between the creation of narrative and the search for identity. What emerges from this film, though, is much closer to narrative closure than anything found in *Eldorado* or *Deux Actrices*. Oddly, however, in terms of eccentricity of narrative style, it falls somewhere in-between these two films. Lepage sees the search for identity as something manageable, and he uses a *modus operandi* for this interpretive strategy that recalls E.D. Hirsch and his insistence on the inherent (if difficult) knowability of a text. Identity is knowable in this film, but it lies beneath an awful lot of construction and (sometimes literal) acting, the disassembling of which gives the narrative its core.

While *Le Confessionale* looks and feels in many ways like a mass-market narrative (its cast even includes Kristin Scott Thomas!) it is still eccentric in important ways. Lepage moves back and forth between present day Québec City and



the Québec City of the 1950s, where Alfred Hitchcock made *I Confess*, the most explicitly Catholic film of his entire oeuvre. While these are clearly tagged as “flashbacks,” however, these sequences act as narrative interruptions and also constitute a secondary narrative just as complete and important to the film overall as the present day sections. They have a *plonge doublement* effect similar to Lanctôt's two narratives in *Deux Actrices*. Further, since the flashback narrative is about the making of *I Confess*, it brings the film to a meta-cinematic level, although one still contained within the bounds of a story (in contrast to the Brechtian strategy of Lanctôt). The viewer's attention is drawn to the mechanics of filmmaking in a way that is uncommon for most classical realist texts. Lepage's film is reminiscent of *Singin' In The Rain*, with its ease of discussing that which is supposed to be taken for granted. *Singin' In The Rain*, however, lays open the workings of the story at the same time that it covers them up, making “invisible” (or classical) style visible in an invisible way. Lepage does not get caught in this trap, instead taking the opportunity created by this discussion of film production to relate it to the overall working of the narrative. We see the way that *I Confess* is made because the Catholic themes that inform that film—guilt, trust, redemption—also inform the life of Pierre, the protagonist of the present day sequences. The laying out of the narrative then, is an invitation to peer into the mechanics of the film overall, and it contributes some signposts to that effort. This laying out is not as overt or oppositional as the video inserts in *Deux Actrices* (again, it's certainly not obligated to be, and being so wouldn't make it a better film), but it is meta-cinematic in a way that *Singin' In The Rain* only pretends to be and *Eldorado* simply does not make any effort to be. A narrative has been created for Pierre by his family at the same time that Hitchcock has created his narrative. It is the artificiality of this narrative, its uncomfortable closeness with this very famous creation, that makes

Pierre's life in the present difficult.

Since this narrative is close to a Hollywood film, however, it is not surprising that it is portrayed as resolvable. Pierre does reach closure, if in an unexpected manifestation, to his quest to peel away the narrative layers. There is something at the core when that search does end. "Marxist critics and formalist critics may be equally able to understand what a text means," writes E.D. Hirsch; "What they usually differ in is the significance they give to that meaning."¹⁰ This is exactly the perspective taken by Lepage, who represents the meaning of the narrative built up around Pierre's family life to be understandable, to be absolute. The salient issue in the narrative, then, is the significance that can be given to that meaning by the various people involved. Pierre's brother Marc clearly will have big problems with what's been uncovered and it means for him not a clarity of identity but a dissolution of what he had already held to be essentially stable and an assortment of psychosexual problems. For the man who turns out to be Pierre's father, who is having sex with Marc it is all a foregone conclusion, not surprising at all. Identity may be constant then, and not in and of itself a product of acting, but what you do with that identity still depends greatly on pretending, denying, concealing, and on acting.

Le Confessionale is defined by paradox. It invites the viewer to understand film as a constructed text, but it still manages to bring its narrative to closure. It insists that there is an immutable core to the narrative of identity, but its very subject is the falseness and instability of familial relations. Lepage shows Québec, then, to be forever defined by a highly Catholic ethic, but nevertheless a place where the absolutes surrounding morality, fidelity, and redemption have still been left up to individuals to puzzle out for themselves. Acting may not create the identity of the characters in *Le Confessionale*, but it defines what they do with that identity.

V. Acting out, acting up, acting on...

That Lanctôt, Binamé and Lepage echo avant garde formal concerns is central to the understanding of their films as part of a distinctly Québécois film culture. It is useful to draw out their films' affinities to counter-cinema practices not because this would supposedly illustrate that they read Brecht, but because focusing on these elements helps to illustrate that *Deux Actrices*, *Eldorado* and *Le Confessionale* are distinctly non-Hollywood films, despite some narrative elements. They echo specific, national concerns, in both their form and their narrative. This is not to say that Hollywood=bad while critical/Brechtian=good. It is fair to say, though, that critical/Brechtian=non-Hollywood, and so the presence of this aesthetic, in whatever ambiguous or hybrid form, is a contributing factor in understanding these films as *distinct*. Further, testing whether these films adhere to or fall short of some sort of idealist Brechtian litmus test is not the point. Rather, the ways that these films *simultaneously* echo and deviate from film practices that evolved with a specifically oppositional political project (and oppositional politics was

always of central importance to Brecht) illustrates the ideologically and formally heterogeneous context from which Lanctôt, Binamé and Lepage spring. Québec is, as Aquin writes, a place where the old (Hollywood) and the new (counter-cinema) are able to intermingle. Awareness of discourses surrounding avant garde film practices on the part of these filmmakers is unknowable. The presence of these aesthetic qualities in their films, however, is clear, and discussing these qualities helps bring to light their Québec-ness (for lack of a better term).

What we can see in several recent films from Québec, then, is a free-floating anxiety about selfhood, and the impossibility of closure to questions about self. Québec is too often understood as a place in a perpetual identity crisis, although a more respectful understanding would focus instead on its rich and diverse tradition of difference and cosmopolitanism. Nevertheless, it should come as little surprise that so much of recent Québec cinema is about the unstable nature of identity, and understanding that recurring concern tells us much about a province on the road to understanding itself as a post-colonial nation. Understanding these struggles as a process of acting, however, has the effect of placing control in the hands of those who are being told what to do. The characters of these films are acting, as opposed to being acted upon, which is, after all, a common complaint of those who advance an anti-colonial analysis of the Québécois reality. In his essay "L'art de la défaite," Aquin draws upon the image of acting as the possibility for liberation from the English, who have always gotten to write the script. At the moment of possibility for victory, he laments that suddenly "the choir had no more voice: how can so many men, at the same moment, forget their lines? Unless... unless it wasn't a question of a blanking of the memory. The choir couldn't continue because the other actors didn't say the words they were supposed to... But the choir, stupefied, can't make the connection if the dramatic action that just unfolded before them wasn't in the text."¹¹ For Aquin, as well for these filmmakers, it's not enough just to sing along to the agreed upon text that tells you who you are. It's essential to be an *actor*.

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10 E.D. Hirsch, "Faulty Perspectives," in David Lodge, ed. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London/New York: Longman Press, 1988), p. 259.

11 "Le chœur n'a plus de voix : comment tant d'hommes, au même moment, peuvent-ils oublier leur texte? A moins que... oui, à moins qu'il ne s'agisse pas d'un blanc de mémoire? Le chœur ne peut pas continuer parce que les autres acteurs n'ont pas dit les paroles qu'ils devaient dire... Le chœur, figé de stupeur, ne peut pas enchaîner si l'action dramatique qui vient de se dérouler n'était pas dans le texte" *Blocs erratiques*, p. 115-116.



BOOK REVIEW

HOWARD HAWKS: The Grey Fox of Hollywood

By Todd McCarthy
Grove Press, New York, 1997.

by Robin Wood

This is a splendid book—invaluable to anyone interested in Hollywood cinema in general and/or the films of Howard Hawks in particular, a mine of fascinating information about both the life and art of an individual and the conditions of work within an extremely complex, highly structured, and often contradictory commercial industry. As a work of scholarship it leaves (as far as I can see at present) nothing to be desired. Todd McCarthy's research appears exhaustive (and must have been exhausting): one has the impression that every surviving document has been examined, every surviving relevant person interviewed.

McCarthy presents Hawks himself as ultimately inaccessible: there are no revealing private documents to speak of, no intimate journals, no letters of a personal nature; those who

On location for *Hatari!*, the film Hawks and his actors invented as they went along.

were close to him generally agree that they didn't really 'know' him beyond a surface level. The patterns of his outward behaviour, however, emerge all too clearly: while he clearly loves Hawks's films, McCarthy makes no attempt to whitewash his treatment of others. As usual, one must not slip into the error of equating person and artist in any simplistic way; on the other hand, there will always be some relation between the two. One can trace clear connections between the portrayal of women in the films and Hawks's attitude to them in his personal life. All three of his wives appear to have been prototypes of, or variations on, the 'Hawks heroine', strong, active, assertive, challenging—the darker side of which is that he seems to have tired of them rather quickly, the marriages ending in separation and divorce, with Hawks (apparently affluent yet continuously penniless because of his extravagances and compulsive gambling) repeatedly negligent over alimony and child support. In this context, the fact that Hawks almost never used the same female star twice in a leading role (Ann Dvorak and Lauren Bacall are the only exceptions) assumes a particular resonance. In Hawks's films the future of the couple is never guaranteed, there are almost no marriages and no families, and children are little monsters. One cannot resist the thought that he should have watched his own movies and taken their message to heart.

Despite the unpleasantness of much of his behaviour, the



Rio Bravo

attraction and fascination that Hawks aroused in so many people seems to have been irresistible. His energy (inseparable perhaps from his arrogance) was inexhaustible, and was sustained right up to his last days: only a short time before his death at 81, he was still speeding across the desert on a motorcycle and sketching out new movie projects. It seems to be a sad but true fact that the dominant characteristics necessary for any artist wishing to make a career in the Hollywood cinema were (and still are) toughness, resilience, arrogance, ruthlessness, a readiness to push oneself, promote oneself, bulldoze one's way to the top; one wonders how many shy, reticent, modest geniuses simply fell by the wayside after the fifth, tenth or twentieth rebuff.

What has interested me most in McCarthy's book, however, is the great wealth of material concerning the background to Hawks's films: the precise nature of the production setups, the relation of studio and producer to director, the evolution of the screenplay from the initial project to the finished film. Here, one is glad to have confirmed at last by interviews and documentation so much of what one had guessed from the internal evidence of the films: yes, Hawks worked with his screenwriters from the outset, supervising the structure, contributing ideas and dialogue, shaping the work from its genesis; yes, he constantly rewrote during shooting, incorporating contributions from the actors (and even at times members of the crew); yes, the majority of actors (after initially finding him forbidding and aloof) loved working with him; and yes,

he did effectively direct *The Thing from Another World* himself. I found the information about this last particularly fascinating as it has always seemed to me among Hawks's perfect films: he was contracted to direct two films and produce one, for RKO; Christian Nyby, his editor on a number of his recent films (*To Have and Have Not*, *The Big Sleep*, *Red River*) had repeatedly expressed a desire to direct; Hawks set Nyby up to direct *The Thing*, with himself as its (nominal) producer. The film's star, Kenneth Tobey, is quoted as saying: 'Chris Nyby directed one scene. Howard Hawks was there, but he let Chris direct one scene. We all rushed into a room, eight or ten of us, and we practically knocked each other over. No one knew what to do'. His testimony is supported by most of the cast, and Nyby himself said later: 'When you are being taught to paint by Rembrandt, you don't take the brush out of his hand.' Hawks loved directing, and was never in doubt as to which was the essential creative role. It is significant that, when he eventually became his own producer, he habitually reversed the usual credit: 'Directed and Produced by Howard Hawks', with the first term sometimes in larger print. While the book is rich in information it is relatively thin in speculation, which McCarthy presumably feels is not the business of the biographer, who deals in facts, documents, interviews. He resists any temptation to psychoanalyse Hawks. Such discipline is certainly legitimate, perhaps laudable, but there are times when I would welcome a little more 'reading between the lines', however tentative. One might, for example, wish to suggest a possible relationship between Hawks's attitude to women and the pervasive homoerotic content of the films, which so many (not only myself) have found so tantalizing. Hawks himself described at least two of his films (*A Girl in Every Port* and *The Big Sky*) as 'love stories between two men', while remaining in interviews staunchly macho and homophobic; his most fully developed project at the time of his death (a loose remake of *A Girl in Every Port*, now about oilriggers) culminated (in the one scene that seems to have been fully written out) with the two heroes in bed together, at first inadvertently, then voluntarily. McCarthy quotes Gerard Blain (the French animal catcher in *Hatari!*) as saying, 'I detected a submerged homosexual in Howard Hawks', but he doesn't pursue this. Given Hawks's ambivalence on the subject (conscious vs. unconscious?), one might adduce (speculatively—there is of course no evidence) another possible explanation beyond those officially offered for the drastic reduction of John Ireland's role in *Red River*. The film contains, in the first meeting of Cherry Valance/Ireland and Matt Garth/Montgomery Clift, the closest thing to overt gay content in all of Hawks's films, the depiction of a casual gay sexual encounter: (a) Cruising (the way the two men look at each other from their respective horsebacks), (b) mutual masturbation (fondling and admiring each other's guns), and (c) ejaculation (the 'shooting' contest). Other reasons for Hawks's virtual elimination of the Ireland character from most of the subsequent film seem well supported by hard evidence, but there can be more motives than one (or even two) for any human behaviour. Is it not at least feasible that (shooting, as he usually did, in sequence, and inventing incident as he went along) Hawks was troubled (at an

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unconscious level) by the expression in one of his own works of desires a little too close to home? Certainly, Matt and Cherry never 'get it all together' again, and, in fact, nothing much of any kind develops between them.

As a work of scholarship, *Howard Hawks* is exemplary; I am less convinced by it as a work of criticism, an ambition to which it intermittently aspires. Todd McCarthy is one of the best critics writing today for *Variety*: that constitutes both his distinction (his criticism is always worth reading) and his limitations. *Variety*, while it has a wide audience among film enthusiasts, is basically a 'trade' paper, its primary function to report on the commercial viability of films in relation to the various specter-ships to which they are addressed ('mainstream', 'art-house', 'family', etc...). Hawks himself (the 'innocent' entertainer who made films in order to 'have fun') tended to assess the value of his films in terms of their commercial success, and in general McCarthy follows him in this—which works just fine in the case of (for example) *Rio Bravo*, a commercially successful film that also happens to be (for me at least) one of the dozen or so touchstones that define cinema (or, at least, one *kind* of cinema). Predictably, on the other hand, *Red Line 7000* (both a commercial and critical disaster, and apparently now mummified as such in film history) is once again swept aside without (it seems to me) any serious consideration. After reading McCarthy's dismissal of it I watched it again on my laserdisc, and again fell under its spell. Hawks himself came to hate it, but for anyone who *really* loves Hawks it holds a special place in his oeuvre: a crystallization of Hawks, or the essential Hawks in comic-strip. I can never understand why everyone thinks the actors are so bad: they seem fine to me (yes, even Gail Hire), and the James Caan/Marianna Hill scenes have an edge that would alone establish the film's value, if anyone took the

trouble to see it. Its alleged defects (bare, tacky sets, the moderately inept 'Wildcat Jones' song number) are in fact assets: (a) If you still think in terms of 'realism', what sort of accommodations, environments and entertainments do you expect stock-car racers to live among; and (b) If you think in terms of 'Hawks', aren't these settings the contemporary equivalent of the sparsely furnished rooms (jail and hotel) of *Rio Bravo*? Like Chance and his assistants, these men who risk their lives daily are not doing it for money or material comfort. The corollary is the admiration McCarthy expresses for *El Dorado* (the one commercial success among Hawks's last four films), a film I dislike more every time I see it. It suffers especially from the comparison it invites with *Rio Bravo*, since it reworks so much of the earlier film's material: the grace, depth, discipline, integrity and intricately worked thematic structure of Hawks's masterpiece is here replaced with coarseness, perfunctoriness and slapdash construction, its deft and delicate comedy with crude farce. Confronted with the two films with the director unidentified, I think one would guess that the later one was an opportunistic 'rip-off' of the earlier by a different and vastly inferior filmmaker. Personal quibbles apart, I cannot recommend Todd McCarthy's book too highly. I wish its information (especially about production background) had been available to me when I wrote my own book on Hawks thirty years ago. I would, however, certainly recommend Grove Press to employ a better proof reader: in a finely produced, lavishly illustrated, hardcover book of this quality, one does not expect to encounter so many minor but annoying errors: repeated words, wrong words, typos...

Robin Wood has completed his final book of film criticism; it will be published by Columbia University Press in the spring of 1998.

The 'love story between two men': Kirk Douglas and Dewey Martin in *The Big Sky*





Bound and Invested

**Lesbian Desire
Hollywood Ethnography**

by **Jean Noble**

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"I want out!"

—Violet, from *Bound*

This essay¹ is grounded in the three triangulated premises suggested by my subtitle: first, that lesbian desire has always haunted a mainstream, popular imaginary;² second, that such hauntings have equally lurked in and around Hollywood for as long as "Hollywood" has had meaning; and third, that the relationship between the former and the latter is completely overdetermined. Russo, Tyler, Dyer and many many others have documented the history of gays and lesbians in Hollywood films, and so I will not duplicate that work here. What I will explore here is the dialogic and noisy collision of three not unrelated discourses—a mainstream, popular imaginary as I construct it; "Hollywood" represented by "film noir" as a formal genre; and those who "do" identity/identification under the sign "Lesbian"—in one recent "queer" and, I would add ethnographic, film: *Bound*.

Let me state my biases right at the outset: I confess an intense and mildly embarrassing attachment to this film. My own response surprised me and like most scholarly work, this paper represents a desire to interrogate that response and answer that persistent question "Why?". Thus, the writing of this text is conditioned by a persistent, but entirely necessary, vacillation between the also triangulated subjectivities of "fan," "critic," and "scholar." I offer that response to the film—product of a *desire* for Violet (Jennifer Tilly); a willing *identification* with Corky (Gina Gershon); and a *disidentification* with Caesar (Joe Pantoliano)—not only as a measure of *Bound's* success, but also as a measure of the genre's own formal and historical preoccupation with the construction/ deconstruction of masculinities, female masculinities included. In other words, the "Why" of my response is not really the mystery; part of what this paper will interrogate is the "How," replacing the rehashed questions: "Who really spoke?" "With what authenticity or originality?" or "And what part of [her] deepest self did [she] express in [her] discourse?" with: "What are the modes of existence of these discourses?" "Where have they been, how do they circulate, and who can appropriate them?" "What are the places in them for possi-

ble subjects?" and "Who can assume these various subject functions?" (Foucault, "What is an Author?" 120).

Also, I'd like to suggest that *Bound*, as a "Hollywood" film foregrounds mainstream or popular discourses about female same-sex desire in transitional gender trouble.³ The competing, dialogic and often contradictory discourses which invest the term "lesbian,"⁴ are mapped onto the bodies of both Violet and Corky, and exist in a dialogic conver-

1. This paper owes several debts. Thanks to the brave and ever-irreverent members of the graduate seminar EN6972.06, York University, Toronto. Thanks also to Jane for the copy of *Bound*. Finally, this paper would not have been possible without the extremely helpful and highly memorable Monday-afternoon homework sessions with graduate student and femme-extraordinaire Connie Carter, to whom this work is dedicated.

2. The idea that lesbian desire haunts Western cultural production is Terry Castle's from *The Apparitional Lesbian*. "When it comes to lesbian ... many people have trouble seeing what's in front of them. The lesbian remains a kind of 'ghost effect' in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot - even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent, at the center of the screen" (2).

3. While *Bound* is actually not produced by a major Hollywood studio, it reads as a "Hollywood" production in its use of American and recognizably "Hollywood" actors (Tilly, Gershon and Joe Pantoliano); its deployment of an American quasi-realist film genre (film noir); etc. *Bound* was produced by the Dino de Laurentiis and Spelling Production companies, and written and directed by independent film makers Larry and Andy Wachowski.

4. Curiously, the word "lesbian" is never uttered in the film; neither do we hear the terms "butch" and/or "femme." Instead, *Bound* deploys the term "dyke" three times and "queer" once, even though all of these subjectivities condition the film's intelligibility. "Dyke" is first spoken by Corky long after the sex scenes between her and Violet during the "quarrel" they have over identity politics. Corky: "Ah, let's see. This is the part where you tell me what matters is on the inside and that inside you there's a little dyke just like me;" to which Violet replies: "No. She's nothing like you. She's a whole lot smarter than you are." Caesar later calls Corky a "dyke" when he is trying to wake her up after knocking her unconscious: "Wake up you fucking dyke." In this same scene we hear the term "queer" used by Caesar as well: "Fucking queers. You make me sick." Finally, Caesar uses the term "dyke" again in relation to Corky, only this time, he's addressing Violet after he finds out where Corky hid the money: "Let's go see if your dyke lied." The slippage between terms is part of the collision of discourses which have produced *Bound*. "Dyke" seems consistent with Corky's identity as a working-class ex-convict, but seems inconsistent with Violet's identity as both femme fatale and femme. These inconsistencies, as I will suggest later in this essay, are a fundamental part of the narrative tension of the film as it attempts to "catch up" with these same changes and debates in lesbian cultures and theory.

sation with lesbian-feminism, lesbian-separatism, lesbian "chic," the recent reiterative citation of historical butch/femme cultures, the current privileging of gender transitivity as *the* mark of queerness, and an entire host of psychodynamics overlapping with each of these events.⁵ Bakhtin reminds us that the significance of any given utterance has to be understood against both the background of language and the history of utterances which overdetermine that utterance's meaning. A particular utterance represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and past meanings of the term, between differing epoches of the past, between tendencies, schools, circles of the present. Each utterance does not exclude these competing conversations, but rather is the site where they intersect with other, where each word is given a "bodily form," and, in fact, "tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (281-93).

I suggest that *Bound* not just remembers these competing conversations over the intelligibility of female same-sex desires, but shows them in direct dialogue with each other. The effect of the discursive heteroglossia in *Bound* is that it manifests that which both lesbian-feminism and Queer Theory have had trouble materializing: that is, a femme body, or as Duggan and McHugh write it, "a queer body in fem(me)inine drag" (153). *Bound* deploys the simulacra of film noir to stage a femme coming-out quest, where she comes-out not to herself, or even to those audience members "in the know," but rather where she comes-out as a lesbian and queer subject in popular culture. Second, if film noir stages heterosexual masculinity in crisis, than part of what precipitates that crisis is a recognition of its own inability to recognize or read "femme" as similar to, but as a self-conscious queering of, both heterosexual femininity and film noir's *femme fatale*. Thus, in *Bound*, as a kind of "Homo Pomo" film noir,⁶ that failure in reading practices constitutes straight masculinities' inevitable and fatal undoing (Rich 32-33).

Bound tells the story of two white dykes who successfully work the mob out of more than two million dollars. Corky, the film's butch⁷ is an ex-con out of prison several months when she takes a plumbing and painting job next door to Caesar, money-launderer for the mob, and his beautiful mob-moll, Violet. *Bound* opened originally to film festival audiences, and, because the delicious sex scenes between Corky and Violet are over within the first 20 minutes, it might seem as though *Bound* wasn't the kind of film that dyke audiences would embrace. However, this lesbian film noir has since become something of an instant lesbian cult classic. It had 1500 dykes at San Francisco's Castro Theatre on their feet applauding the ending, has since won a prize at the Los Angeles OutFest, and Tilly and Gershon have graced the cover of almost every lesbian magazine from Canada to England (Rich 1996, 68).

There are two scenes in *Bound* which foreground its status as a discursive event. The first, is the opening scene of Corky bound and gagged in Violet's closet, and the second is the confrontation between Corky and Violet over sexual-

ity and identity. And needless to say, the latter is completely overdetermined or conditioned by the former. Recall in that first scene, the camera's trajectory is one which moves from the wall of the closet, vertically up over shelves holding hat boxes, onto dresses hanging from hangers, back over to the wall where we see more vertical shelves only this time holding white high heels. At that point the camera's gaze has moved back down to the floor, our eye following the camera as it moves from white high heels, to Corky's black boots, to the white rope around her ankles. At this point, it moves horizontally over Corky's body, up her arm, lingering a moment on the black labrys tattoo, then back over her bruised face, then fades. The visual images do the work of establishing both gender, and gender difference: Corky's masculinized body (the boots, pants, tattoos, and for those "in the know," the labrys, etc.) mark her clearly as gender transitive and in direct contrast with the signifiers of femininity the camera fetishizes: hats, dresses, high heels. However, the voice-over works with and against the visual images inviting us to read these images in a very particular way, setting up the terms of both the film noir plot *and* the discursive conflict the film will work out. The first voice we hear is Tilly's. "I had this image of you inside of me, like a part of me." Then Corky: "You planned this whole thing." Violet: "We make our own choices we pay our own prices." Corky: "Five years is a long time," Caesar: "Where's the fucking money," and so on, until the moment where the camera begins to pan Corky's body. This moment, as the camera lingers over the labrys, is where we hear yet another curious voice-over, Tilly's impassioned voice pleading: "I want out." Diagetically, the narrative goes on to contextualize Violet's imperative as her desire to leave the mob, the family business. But for "those in the know" (and I will return to how this knowing group is constituted a bit later), the setting of this scene—the *closet*—and the details of the voice-over — "I had this image of you inside of me, like a

5. See, for instance, Julia Creet's "Daughter of the Movement: The Psychodynamics of Lesbian S/M Fantasy."

6. There are, generally speaking, a number of recurring motifs or ingredients of film noir: Settings are either city-bound, usually lit for night, often with darkened or rain-washed streets, or highly stylized but dimly-lit interior spaces. *Bound* is set in Chicago, but most of the action takes place inside, either in Caesar's dimly-lit apartment or the apartment next door that Corky is renovating, with short scenes set in Corky's apartment, Johnnie's apartment and the butch-femme bar, the "Watering Hole." *Bound* manipulates oblique and vertical lines (notice the tall, vertical letters of the film's title and opening credits; the verticality of the opening images, etc.). A complex chronological order and a use of convoluted time sequencing reinforce the disorientation produced by oblique and vertical camera angles and function to immerse the film noir viewer in both a space and time-disoriented but highly stylized world. (Notice that most of the story in *Bound* is revealed through Corky's flashbacks as she waits bound and gagged in the closet.)

7. In her review of the film, Judith Halberstam notes the problem with casting Gina Gershon as Corky: "It must be said, however, that at the end of the day, Gershon only partially succeeds in bring a convincing butch persona to the silver screen. ... Everything [about her performance] is right—except for, well, Gina. There's still a show-girl lurking beneath the grime and a vixen behind the lone wolf" (14). That said, I do think it's important to notice that the film not just expects us, but requires that we read Corky as a figure of masculinity, despite the failure in casting.

Curtin, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987).



part of me," but, more importantly, "I want *out*" — suggest an entirely different narrative (emphasis mine). That is, this opening scene visually, discursively and metaphorically, stages the performative act of "coming out the the closet," or, at least, establishes the desire to come out as *Bound's* subtextual femme quest narrative. Recall again that Violet's "like a part of me" repeats just before the fade, suturing that scene to the one that follows. After the fade, the film cuts to Corky in the elevator hearing that voice again, "hold the elevator" as Corky first encounters Violet as the obvious subject of that closetful of feminine signifiers. Corky and Violet, both wearing leather jackets although Corky's is a short men's motorcycle jacket while Violet's is a longer more feminine jacket, are positioned behind Caesar forming a triangle. I will return to this triangle and a discussion of the film's sexual geometrics later. Violet removes her sunglasses, they exchange a smouldering look which seems to surprise Corky, and as Violet and Caesar exit the elevator, the camera, supposedly Corky's gaze, follows Violet's legs in slow motion down the hallway. By the end of this scene, Violet is ambiguously marked: she could be heterosexual and mob-moll or she could also be bisexual, connected to Caesar but flirting with Corky; she could also be our film noir femme fatale. Her name, in fact, signifies all of these very ambiguous possibilities. Add an "n" to the word Violet and she becomes "violent."⁸ But violet also signifies a deep shade of purple, not an insignificant queerly marked colour. Finally, as a colour, violet comes from the flower so named for its colour; but for those of us who know both our botany and semiotics, the violet is also cousin to the overdetermined "pansy."⁹

Either way, Violet is a figure of powerful and potentially dangerous female sexuality, and the tensions superimposed onto her come to the foreground in the second scene I want to look at: the confrontation between Violet and Corky over sexual and identity politics. I would argue that this is one of the most important scenes in the film, where the epistemologies of that same lesbian closet—discourses of lesbian-feminism, lesbian-separatism, and butch-femme—dramatically rupture the surface of the narrative. By this time an important synchronicity has been established between Corky and Violet: Corky did five years in prison, Violet has done five years with Caesar in the "family business." Both have occupied homosocial spaces: Corky in the Watering Hole and prison and Violet in the almost exclusively male mob family business, but this synchronicity is one Violet embraces, and Corky disavows. Once again, this scene opens with Tilly's voice repeating a line we heard in the opening scene. The camera shows us Violet on her bed as she repeats "I had this image of you inside of me, like a part of me" and cuts to Corky dressing beside the bed. Corky's clearly having doubts about Violet, wanting to read her as heterosexual and merely curious about lesbians, or bisexual and curious. The dialogue is overdetermined, foregrounding the competing discourses investing the term "dyke" (Corky's term) but also showing those discourses—both historical and current—in transition. They quarrel,

and indeed part company, because Corky insists they are "different." Corky arrogantly polices the essentialized boundaries of lesbian identity, her body marked as both lesbian and butch, by arguing that Violet cannot be lesbian because she "has sex" with men, and doesn't "look" lesbian. Violet, as part of her quest to get "out" both as lesbian and femme, deploys an alibi of ontological essence to insist that, despite how things might appear, she doesn't have sex with men. Violet: "I know *what* I am. I don't have to have it tattooed on my shoulder" (emphasis mine).

Indeed, *Bound* manipulates this very tension between "appearances" and "reality" in a number of important ways. One of the primary features of film noir is its staging of confusion and betrayal for the male protagonist. For instance, part of Caesar's quest in *Bound* is to "second guess" Johnnie's supposed plot against him in order to recover the money and restore order. However, the viewer is sutured into the film by our knowledge that Johnnie *isn't*, in fact, the one who has "fucked" Caesar. But, like Corky, we as viewers are not certain through most of the film that Violet is actually sincere in her desire to escape with Corky and the money. Moreover, this uncertainty "works" precisely because the genre historically portrayed strong, sexy and powerful female figures who, in the end, always betray the male protagonist. Corky herself is not certain she can believe what she sees. During the steamy seduction scene, Violet knows that Corky doesn't "read" her as lesbian. Violet addresses both Corky and the viewer when she slips Corky's hand under her dress and says: "You can't believe what you see, but you can believe what you feel." In other words, *Bound* works because it self-consciously manipulates generic characteristics and ultimately binds the trust of the viewer with Corky's.

Indeed, *Bound* binds the traditional features of film noir with the competing knowledge or truth regimes which have emotionally bound and politically invested "inversion" or "butch" as *the* signifier of lesbian, regimes both synchronic and diachronic which have either unintentionally or conscious cast femme as *the* suspect "lesbian." Sedgwick traces these twentieth-century epistemological regimes, or contradictory ways of organizing same-sex desire, onto a kind of orthogonal chart, a mapping which has profoundly troubling implications for femme, the likes of which we see *Bound* struggling with in these scenes (1990, 86-90). Sedgwick suggests that same-sex desire has been understood as an impulse of gender-separatism, where the members of one sex share so much that they bond on the axes of sexuality too. For same-sex female desire, this impulse produced lesbian-feminism/lesbian-separatism in the form of the woman-identified woman. On the other hand, Sedgwick also suggests that same-sex desire has been understood as an impulse of gender liminality or transitivity, where the appropriate gender crossings produced, and continue to produce, female masculinity, or the figure of "butch." Within these terms femme cannot appear. Indeed, the question then becomes not whether Violet is actually "lesbian," but rather, how femme can mark itself as lesbian

when most of the specular markers remain those of gender transitivity? Thankfully, though, even in this moment which continues to privilege gender-transitivity as the mark of "lesbian," femme persists. "She" poses productive challenges to the ways we conceive of the relationships between gender and sexuality. But these triangular terms—that is, butch (either marked or unmarked) as the "real" lesbian; her "girl" (ie. the femme); and the "real" man who eventually "gets" the girl—have bound lesbian identity, casting suspicion on femme as a supposedly "less-than real" lesbian identity since nineteenth-century sexology and since Mary "abandoned" Stephen Gordon and ran off with Martin Hallam in Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*.¹⁰

Interestingly, such triangulations continue to overdetermine what I am calling the "sexual geometrics" of *Bound*. Earlier I noted that, in the elevator scene, Corky and Violet are standing behind Caesar forming a triangle. I also noted that the building on North Franklin Street which houses Caesar's apartment has a three part structure, a central wing with two wings on either side of it.¹¹ The grouping of things into motifs of three repeats consistently throughout *Bound*. In addition to the central triangle of Corky, Violet and Caesar, we also see that during the initial elevator scene, the camera captures their triangle from over head. When they leave the elevator, the camera reveals three interlocking diamond shapes which form triangles on the elevator floor. Corky is working in apartment number 1003; there are three paint cans where she hides the money, and so on. Most importantly, in one of the very early scenes where Corky is speaking on the phone with Mr. Beenkeeni, the man who hired her to do the renovations in the first place, the camera reveals a two-part triangle tattoo on Corky's right hand. This triangle is tattooed in black just where her thumb and hand meet, and just *outside* of each side or wall of the triangle, a small circle appears so that the inner triangle is contained by the three circles which form another triangle.

The outline of the black triangle on Corky's hand evokes the recent appropriation of pink and black triangles as symbols of gay, lesbian and prostitute identities respectively. The triangle is also an important trope in psychoanalysis as *Bound* traces Corky, Violet and Caesar working through their respective Oedipal or "family" dramas. But the triangular figures also foreground the struggle for dominance between male homosociality and female same-sex desire in this film noir. In her book, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Terry Castle takes Eve Sedgwick to task for foreclosing upon lesbian desire in her earlier work *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). In that brilliant meditation on male homosociality, Sedgwick argues that English literature has been structured by what she calls the "erotic triangle" of male homosocial desire. Just as patriarchal culture has traditionally been organized around a ritualized "traffic" in women, so the fictions and cultural work produced within patriarchal culture have tended to mimic or represent that same triangular structure. Any system of

male domination thus depends on two things: first, on the maintenance of highly charged attachments between men; and two, by maintaining the necessity of triangulation itself by preserving the male-female-male erotic paradigm as a way of fending off the destabilizing threat of male homosexuality. Sedgwick's evidence is a large body of classic English and American fiction where the triangular male-female-male figure returns at the conclusion of each story (and I would add, each film noir narrative) as a sign of heteronormative male bonding and the simultaneous remobilization of patriarchal control (Castle 68-69). Castle rereads Sedgwick's male-female-male triangle and notes that since it only remains stable when its single female term is unrelated to any other female term, it forecloses on the possibilities of female-female eroticization. Thus, Castle argues, in a passage which I think accounts for these recurring motifs in *Bound*: "Once two female terms are conjoined in space, an alternative structure comes into being, a female-male-female triangle ... in the most radical transformation of female bonding—ie., from homosocial to lesbian bonding—the two female terms indeed merge and the male term drops out" (73-85). In other words, where there is male homosociality, there is no room for lesbian desire.

Clearly, the shifting positions of the triangles in *Bound* suggest this very struggle for dominance. Tracing Caesar's isolation in this triangle and eventual "undoing" also foregrounds the way *Bound*, in essence, manipulates the formal and contradictory elements of film noir to manifest lesbian desire. If Corky and Violet are successful in stealing (stealing as an activity which Corky likens to fucking), and in setting up Johnnie Mazzoni as the guilty party, then Caesar becomes the isolated term, "fucked" in his own homophobic imagination by the man he hates the most. In fact, Caesar is undone precisely because he stubbornly refuses to read Violet as lesbian, preferring instead to continue reading her as heterosexual. His repeated disavowals, his own refusal to know what he knows when he knows it only accelerates the inevitable. "Everybody knows your kind can't be trusted" he tells Corky. Within minutes though he once again re-invests Violet with his trust, admitting he needs her help to convince Mickey everything is "normal." This moment is profoundly ironic and emphasizes Caesar's hysteria. He has already murdered the symbolic father, Gino Mazzoni, and even though the mob is beyond 'offi-

8. Acknowledgements here to Dr. Bob Wallace for his observation of the slippage between "violet" and "violent."

9. For more detailed accounts of the semiotic history of the colour violet as a sign of lesbianism in literature, film and theatre, see Judy Grahn, *Another Mother Tongue* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992); and Kaier

10. Such femme-phobic triangulations have been brilliantly challenged. See Newton (1984), Nestle (1987 & 1992), Feinberg (1993), Chrystos (1993), Davis and Kennedy (1993), Newman (1995), Pratt (1995), Cvetkovich (1995), Martin (1996), Duggan and McHugh (1996), Carter and Noble (1996), and Harris and Crocker (1997).

11. It is no accident that the camera pans the street sign (North Franklin Street) as it traces the verticality of the building which houses the film's action. Later we see Caesar clad in an apron literally "laundering" (washing, drying and ironing) the 2 million dollars. As he hangs the money in his apartment to dry, the camera zooms in on one of the hundred dollar bills to reveal the smiling face of Benjamin Franklin.

cial' laws and rules, Caesar's obsessive fear of detection and punishment furthers his undoing. He is not only alienated from the external structures of homosocial masculinity but is pitted against his own internalization of those structures as a kind of superego, or as an integral component of the properly coded masculine self (Krutnik 163). Whereas film noir is marked by its obsessive need to reorder these disruptions and schisms in masculinity and reconsolidate masculine homosocial orders of family and business, *Bound* refuses such uncomplicated and heteronormative consolidations.

With the exception of Corky, all the other figures of masculinity in *Bound* are similarly implicated in these sexual geometrics. In fact, as the geometrics work themselves out, heteronormative masculinity becomes increasingly fragmented and impotent. Shelly, (and note the gender ambiguous name) the man who originally embezzled the money, functions as a kind of double for both Caesar and Corky. He is established as a figure of male masochism (Violet has previously suggested he in fact wanted to be caught), and as a feminized man, he is taunted as a "bitch" before and during his symbolic castration. He reminds both Caesar and Corky what's at stake in the possible plot resolutions. Mickey too is fractured between his homosocial bonds with Caesar and his desire for Violet. She manipulates his desire for her for right up to the end, where we see her pitting the two men against each other. Mickey quite ironically anticipates not only his own weakness, but those potentially misogynist gender contradictions embedded within film noir when he says: "[Women] make us do stupid things."

As heteronormative masculinity diminishes, Corky's butch body, on the other hand, maintains its own contradictory relation to both femininity and masculinity. Eventually, the sexual geometrics as well as the formal and diegetic features of film work metonymically to reconstitute Corky as the parodic or reiterative figure of masculinity in the narrative. Marked as masculine by her gaze, but also by tattoos, men's underwear, undershirts, boots, pants, etc., Corky is also marked as female by the labrys and by the camera when she's fucked by Violet. Femme's desire for female masculinity, evidenced by Violet's ability to read and desire Corky as both female and masculine, both re-orient female masculinity as a productive contradiction between a female inscribed body and a masculine gender performance, but also as the privileged site of masculinity in the film.¹² Recall the way music functions to enable this metonymic slippage: Aretha Franklin sings "I never loved a man the way that I love you" in the background as Corky cruises Susie Bright in the Watering Hole, lyrically demarcating femme desire for female masculinity as profoundly different from, and not a simple imitation of, heterosexual female desire for men. After Corky gets fucked by Violet, Ray Charles sings as Corky spins around her truck in a post-Violet haze: "Let me tell you about a girl I know / She's my baby and she lives next door / Every morning before the sun comes up, she brings me coffee in my favourite cup / that's

why I know I love her so," suturing this narrative back to the second meeting between Violet and Corky, where Violet does indeed live next door and bring her coffee. And finally, when Corky drives away in her new truck with both Violet and the money, Tom Jones ironically serenades them with his "She's a Lady:" "Well she's all you'd ever want / she's the kind you'd like to flaunt and take to dinner." And at the strategic moment when Corky screeches away with Violet, we hear the all-important chorus "She's a lady, and the lady is mine."

What intrigues me about this triangulation is the way it stages the metonymic and torsional queering of the traditional female figure in film noir as well. In her work on the women of film noir, Christine Gledhill argues that among the multiple stereotypes of women in film noir, the femme fatale stands out as the most popular and virulent (6). Both she and Janey Place argue that the source and the operation of the femme fatale's sexual power and danger to the hero exists precisely in the iconography of her image. That iconography is most often explicitly sexual and is a manipulation of the images that "Hollywood" itself has produced (Place, 45). Recall Violet's short, low-cut mostly black velvet dresses, stocking clad legs, high heels, and most importantly, high sexy voice. Tilly's previous performance in Woody Allen's *Bullets Over Broadway* catapulted her into public attention when she received an Oscar nomination for her portrayal of the stereotypical mob-moll with all of these same features. Gledhill suggests that part of the paradoxical work of film noir is to defamiliarize this sexual iconography in order to enhance the male protagonist's surprise when the femme fatale turns against him (13).

In film noir there is a proliferation of points of view and a struggle within the text for one viewpoint to gain hegemony. For the image of women in these films ... the struggle may be between men for control of the image; or more usually ... between the man and the woman. [T]hough the heroines of film noir, by virtue of male control ... are rarely accorded ... full subjectivity and fully expressed point[s] of view ... their *performance* of the roles accorded them ... foregrounds the fact of their image as an artifice and suggests another place behind the image where the woman might [actually] be. (Gledhill 17)

Bound stages a struggle over hegemonic interpretations of female sexual iconography, a struggle which turns out to be fatal for heterosexual masculinity. Both Jesse (Bright's character whom Corky tries to pick up in the Watering Hole) and Violet poach this iconography for the purposes of making *femme* sexual identities visible. In *Bound* and for an audience "in the know," highheels, short and low cut dresses, slips, stockings and garter belts all feature as doubly signifying objects, simultaneously gesturing toward both femme and femme fatale. The film expects us to read Violet as both, right up to and including the scene where Violet, playing her part as femme fatale and appropriately clad in a



full-length, black silk robe, finally comes face to face with Caesar, who erroneously stakes his life on a (mis)reading of her. Both the reading practices, and by implication the epistemologies, of the straight mind break down in this struggle for dominance. Indeed, Violet reminds Caesar of the costs of such arrogant reading practices just before she shoots him: "Caesar" she says, "You don't know shit."

Violet's resignification of femme fatale into powerful femme simultaneously redresses similar misconceptions in lesbian and lesbian-feminist discourses about the supposedly mimetic relation between heterosexuality and butch-femme sexual practices. *The Joy of Lesbian Sex*, for example, writes the following about butch/femme: "Back in the days when role-playing in the style of straight couples was more common, butch referred to the 'masculine' partner, femme to the 'feminine' ... Pathetically, this behavior was generally a parody of the worst heterosexual coupling: the butch stomping and hen-pecked, the femme kittenish and nagging" (40). More specifically, femme was both suspect: "... the femme could even ... as easily go with a man and continue to play the passive, submissive role" and pathologized:

"... these women [who adopt the 'feminine' attire: 'spike heels, tight skirts, lavish makeup, long fingernails, bouffant hair styles,' etc.] have rejected contemporary liberation movements ... and find psychological and sexual satisfaction in passivity, submission and heterosexual game-playing" (40, 65).¹³ "Oddly enough," they continue, "lesbians who assume the opposite 'masculine' role have the edge in terms of general mental health" (65). In many ways, *Bound* replies to and redresses these misreadings. Violet's role is far more active. We see her not only seducing Corky, but pursuing Corky after Caesar's intrusion. "I wanted to apolo-

12. The notion of "re-orientation" in filmic viewing pleasure is from Chris Straayer's *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientation in film and video*.

13. Published in 1977 by a "mainstream" publisher (Simon and Schuster) *The Joy of Lesbian Sex* was part of the hugely successful *The Joy of Sex* series, and like *Bound* which was produced in an entirely different historical moment, shows lesbian discourse in transition with regard to butch/femme. While it carries all the markers of "scientific truth" (it was co-authored by "Dr." Emily L. Sisley; was promoted as part of *The Joy of Sex* series as an "compendium" and "sex-manual," etc.) it encapsulates much of the contradictory thinking about lesbian, butch and femme identities and/or sexual practices. For instance, while arguing that femme "could just as easily go with a man," it also argues that "the femme was still thoroughly lesbian" (40).

gize," Violet tells Corky as she surprises her by following her into the truck. Corky responds with a refusal of what she anticipates as an apology for sex. Violet does not play the role of seductress and recipient of Corky's sexual attentions; she is sexual initiator and as the scene jumps to Corky's bed we see Corky on her back and Violet/femme fucking Corky/butch. Thus, *Bound* refuses lesbian-feminist misreadings of butch-femme cultures which equated femme with passivity, and butch with sexual aggressivity. Moreover, it is Violet who must play a far more active and direct role in the various plots, while Corky spends much of the time either waiting in the apartment next door, or bound in Violet's closet. In the closing chase scene, for example, Violet runs *down* the long staircase of the building in order to lure Caesar away from Corky. And in the final scene where Violet shoots Caesar, Corky has been, yet again, knocked unconscious and it is Violet who brings the plot to closure.

Thus, Violet's marking as both lesbian and femme, and as the agent of both violence and closure, brings about a long overdue shift in the terms of femme intelligibility as well. Lynda Hart's stunning *Fatal Women* traces the emergence of two tropes in nineteenth-century criminology and sexology: the congenital invert and the female offender. Hart argues that the inversion model of same-sex desire, a model sexologists like Ellis deployed to account for female same-sex desire, facilitated the entry of the lesbian into the visual field by establishing a set of (physical) characteristics that could presumably be interpreted/read, while at the same time making it impossible for her to be seen as a woman: "the female invert was a woman minus the possibility of representing herself as a woman" (7-9). Similarly, criminology also produced the female offender as masculine, suggesting that because crime is symbolically masculine, she too, like the invert, is "more like a man than she is like a normal woman. She retains the sex of a female but acquires the gender attributes of masculinity" (13). Thus, Hart argues both the congenital invert and the female offender marked the limits of cultural femininity. "They did so as a couple, not separately, but together. [And] this is a wedding that has continued well into the twentieth century" (13). But what Hart's inversion model does not and cannot account for is the *non-inverted* woman, or the figure of Violet, who is *not* marked by those supposedly physical characteristics which might facilitate her currency within a queer specular economy. Violet is indeed marked by her ability to represent herself as feminine. In fact, it is that very overdetermined sexual iconography and those paradoxical signifiers of femininity which mark her as both lesbian and female. And her rage at Caesar's arrogant misreading of her, indeed, her unsanctioned murder of Caesar constitutes an act of queer violence not only to the homosocial order of the film but to those nineteenth and twentieth-century truth regimes which have bound her as an utter impossibility.¹⁴

Similarly, Violet as femme survives past the predictable endings which have bound traditional film noir. In the

scene right before Violet and Corky drive away, the camera returns us to Caesar's former apartment. Only now, it's empty and lit for daytime as the camera sweeps through it. This movement beyond the formal film noir ending is emphasized by the stark white walls of the apartment in sunlight, and as the camera pauses on Violet's empty closet, we see it too has been emptied. Camera cuts to Violet saying goodbye to Mickey outside in the sunlight, where we learn Caesar has somehow mysteriously "disappeared" with the money. Mickey is still bound by his desire for Violet, but as she maintains her refusal of that role she continues to glance over her shoulder outside the frame of the camera and beyond the law of the father toward the "space-off" (De Lauretis 1987). And we, as audience in the know, realize that that is where Corky waits for her. Violet's quest is over; her closet is empty; she has indeed come *out*. Thus, my assertion: the film opens with the triangle—Caesar: Violet: and either Shelly, Johnnie or Mickey (who all vie for that third spot) — which is quickly transformed into our female-bonding triangle—Violet: Caesar: Corky—which is, in the end, re-oriented and queered into a butch-femme triangle: female (Corky and Violet): femme (Violet): masculine (Corky).

Ultimately, *Bound* has been produced and oriented toward a very particular audience. Earlier in my introduction I referred to this film as an ethnographic film. In her essay, "Are All Latins from Manhattan? Hollywood, Ethnography, and Cultural Colonialism," Ana M. López makes the very compelling argument that Hollywood cinema does not *portray* Latin Americans in film via popular stereotypes. Rather, López suggests we understand Hollywood functioning as an ethnographic discourse which creates, invests, and indeed, *co-produces* those very images themselves (405). Drawing on the theory of post-modern ethnographers such as Stephen Tyler and James Clifford, as well as that of postcolonialist Edward Said, López writes,

... it means to think of Hollywood not as a simple reproducer of fixed and homogeneous cultures or ideologies, but as a producer of some of the multiple discourses that intervene in, affirm, and contest the socioideological struggles of a given moment. To think of a classic Hollywood film as ethnographic discourse is to affirm its status as an authored, yet collaborative, enterprise, akin in practice to the way contemporary ethnographers have defined their discipline ... "not as the experience and interpretation of a circumscribed 'other' reality, but rather as a constructive negotiation involving ... conscious politically significant subjects." (López quoting Clifford, 405)

In her insistence that Hollywood be understood as collaboratively *co-producing* subjects, López provides us with a way to account for not just the verisimilitude of the signifier "lesbian" in *Bound*, but also to account for the privileged viewing position in terms of the film's audience.

If ethnography provides access to “community” or the shared codes, meaning systems, visual iconography of cultural sub-groups, then clearly, *Bound* deployed an ethnographic method in its production and functions as a discursively collaborative event (Clifford 16). Notorious and well-known “sex radical” Susie Bright plays the role of “narrator,” or “native informant” in the production of the film. Bright is listed as a “technical consultant” and co-directed, indeed, translated “lesbian sex” onto the silver screen. Indeed, much of the lesbian “realness” of the film can be attributed to Bright’s involvement in the event. Halberstam notes that the bar scene “is on the money in terms of finding the right combination of cool anonymity and cozy ... familiarity. *Bound* proves that if filmmakers wanted to know how to represent lesbians, all they had to do was ask” (1997 14). Indeed, the Wachowski brothers did ask, and Bright, formerly known as “Susie Sexpert,” stepped forward. Bright’s career as a “sexpert” began in San Francisco’s sex toy store Good Vibrations and “Susie Sexpert” was the pen-name Bright chose while penning her advice column ‘Toys For Us’ in the debut issue of the lesbian sex magazine *On Our Backs*. Since then, many of Bright’s columns, essays, interviews and lectures have been published in her four books which interrogate and critique the state of sex in America. Her first three books—*Susie Sexpert’s Lesbian Sex World*; *Susie Bright’s Sexual Reality: A Virtual Sex World Reader*; *Sexwise*—were published by Cleis Press, a small alternative queer press designed for a lesbian audience. “Susie Sexpert” also made a cameo appearance in Monika Treut’s film *Virgin Machine* as a ‘caller’ in front of a lesbian sex bar, and her most recent project is a collaborative collection of lesbian erotic photography with Jill Posener, *Nothing But the Girl*.

But Bright’s irreverent wit and razor-sharp political critique, as well as her several best-selling anthologies of erotic literature including *Herotica* (Down There Press, 1988); *Herotica II* (Plume 1992); *Best American Erotica of 1994* (Macmillan 1994) and *Herotica III* (Plume 1994), have cemented her reputation outside of lesbian communities as an “American treasure,” and “America’s favorite X-rated intellectual” (Sally Tisdale, back cover and promotional literature for *Sexwise*). Bright’s most recent book *Sexual State of the Union*—published by Simon and Schuster in hardcover with a dustjacket sporting a photograph of a naked white woman draped in an American flag—was marketed not to a lesbian audience, but to a “mainstream” audience instead (Findlay 1997). Many of these essays make reference to Bright’s appearances as a lecturer and sex educator at college campuses across the United States, excerpting long quotations from questionnaires given during those talks. Others critique censorship practices (both on and off the internet), analyze recent “sex panics” like the cult of missing children, muse over the politics of gay marriage, and expostulate the joy of pornography. But one essay in particular, “I Love Being a Gender,” shows Bright’s at her best as both a theorist and translator of femme desire. The piece shows Bright’s working through her own ambiva-

lences about a young butch planning to begin sex reassignment surgery by going on male hormones, wanting to be supportive but also aware that such a transition is not without effects for her as femme. Bright articulates the difference between the “butch” she had known and the “femmy guy with a beard” she was facing, especially the ways such transitions configure her own desire for female masculinity.

I took my time to notice him, and s/he let me look her [sic] up and down. S/he had changed—yes, a lot had changed; s/he was wearing men’s clothes, not ... jeans and boots and her complexion had changed, her hair. S/he looked like a man, a soft, decidedly un-macho man; she didn’t look like a bulldagger anymore ... I wasn’t attracted to her anymore. I was hot for a butch dyke ... a femmy guy with a beard and a suit left me cold. (96)

Moreover, Bright identifies the precision of butch-femme desire, a precision which in *Bound* also constitutes Violet’s desire for Corky.

[D]id you have a femme lover, did you have someone in your life who respected your masculinity and treated you like a butch in bed? (97)

By structuring these verisimilitudes into the narrative (recall Violet’s qua the camera’s gaze on Corky’s hands, upper torso as she’s painting, etc.) *Bound* both relies on and produces a very particular viewing subject, one “in the know” by virtue of her ability to pleasurably recognize, “read,” and decipher those visual and erotic codes. It is this subject “in the know” who is required to invest her trust in Violet as “lesbian” and who is thereby sutured, or bound, by the narrative in order for the narrative to do its work. Conversely, and despite his efforts to outwit the narrative which will inevitably bring about his down fall, Caesar neither recognizes nor reads those codes. In fact, he continues to disavow their dangerous currency right up to the time Violet shoots him.

But Bright also appears *within* the film as Jesse, the femme Corky tries to pick-up in the lesbian bar scene. Bright’s appearance within the film she helped produce, especially in a 1990’s lesbian bar scene which “cites” or reiterates butch-femme as the trope of lesbian identity, foregrounds both the conditions of *Bound*’s production and ethnography’s poststructuralist turn. Clifford reminds us that such self-reflexive awareness of the discursive aspects of cultural representation is a characteristic of a new ethnography which draws attention not to the interpretation of cultural “texts” but to their relations of production instead (16). By crediting Bright as “technical consultant” and then marking Bright’s appearance within the narrative

14. See Halberstam, 1993. “[R]age is a political space opened up by the representation in art, in poetry, in narrative, in popular film, of unsanctioned violences committed by subordinate groups upon powerful white men” (187). Even though Caesar’s racial identity is ambiguous, the fact that Violet murders Caesar still functions to situate the film within Halberstam’s terms of “rage.”

as part of the very culture, and by implication the audience the film is marketed towards (Jesse is marked as femme through her manipulation of feminine sexual iconography: long hair; tight fitting leather vest; deep cleavage which Corky doesn't fail to notice, etc.), *Bound* reveals itself to be a product of both lesbian representational and textual history and the reiterative performance of that history. The film diegetically creates, but then subtextually and extra-diegetically manipulates and privileges the "in the know" viewing position, simultaneously weaving both the context of its production and the context of its consumption into the narrative itself.

This leads me to a final set of questions: why *Bound* and why now? Krutnik counsels us when considering cinematic and generic production to ask why "certain genres are in favour at one time and out of favour in another" (14). Sylvia Harvey similarly reminds us that film noir, in particular, captures and magnifies those moments where hidden foundations, or dominant systems of values and beliefs, are shaken or disrupted. "Film noir offers us again and again examples of abnormal or monstrous behavior, which defy the [established] patterns ... and which hint at a series of radical and irresolvable contradictions buried deep within the total system of economic and social interactions that constitute the known [epistemic] world" (1978 22). I suggest that a recent episode of that great barometer of American culture—*The Simpsons*—reveals at least a partial answer to my question. "Homer's Phobia" aired on February 16, 1997, with the guest voice performed by John Waters. Marge has just told Homer John is gay. Homer screams. Marge tells Homer that John has invited them all out for a drive. Homer says he won't go. Why? Well, the dialogue at this point is telling. Homer: "Not because John's gay, but because he's a sneak. He should at least have the good taste to mince around and let everyone know that he's [pause] that way." Marge: "What on earth are you talking about?" Homer: "You know me, Marge. I like my beer cold, my TV loud, and my homosexuals FLA-AA-MING." As he utters these words, Homer holds both hands up with limp wrists. In other words, Homer was unsettled because he "couldn't tell" John was gay. Homer wants his queers to *look like* queers. *Bound* struggles with a similar phobic hysteria. Corky, who 'looks' and is marked as queer, isn't *the* threat to the heteronormative family; Violet, on the other hand, *is* a threat precisely because she doesn't look the part. I am not suggesting that we rank butch or femme as either "more subversive" or "less subversive." However, I suggest that if film noir stages a failure in masculinity as a sign of a disjunction between, on the one hand, the contemporary representational possibilities of the masculine self-image and, on the other, the traditional cultural codifications and reconsolidations of masculinity, then *Bound* marks the current limitations and anxieties of white masculinity and its discontents (Krutnik 91). Krutnik suggests that the popularity of film noir in the mid-to-late 1940s is perhaps evidence of a crisis of confidence with the contemporary regimentation of white masculinity. One can only hope that

Bound, as a hybrid and accidental collision of film noir, recent girl buddy films, the reiteration of butch-femme sexual practices as well as post-sex war politics and a paradoxical fetishization of the 'queer' in popular culture, signals a similar, but perhaps more effective, crisis in the 1990s.

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Nil By Mouth

Gummo

FILM FESTIVALS

TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL 1997

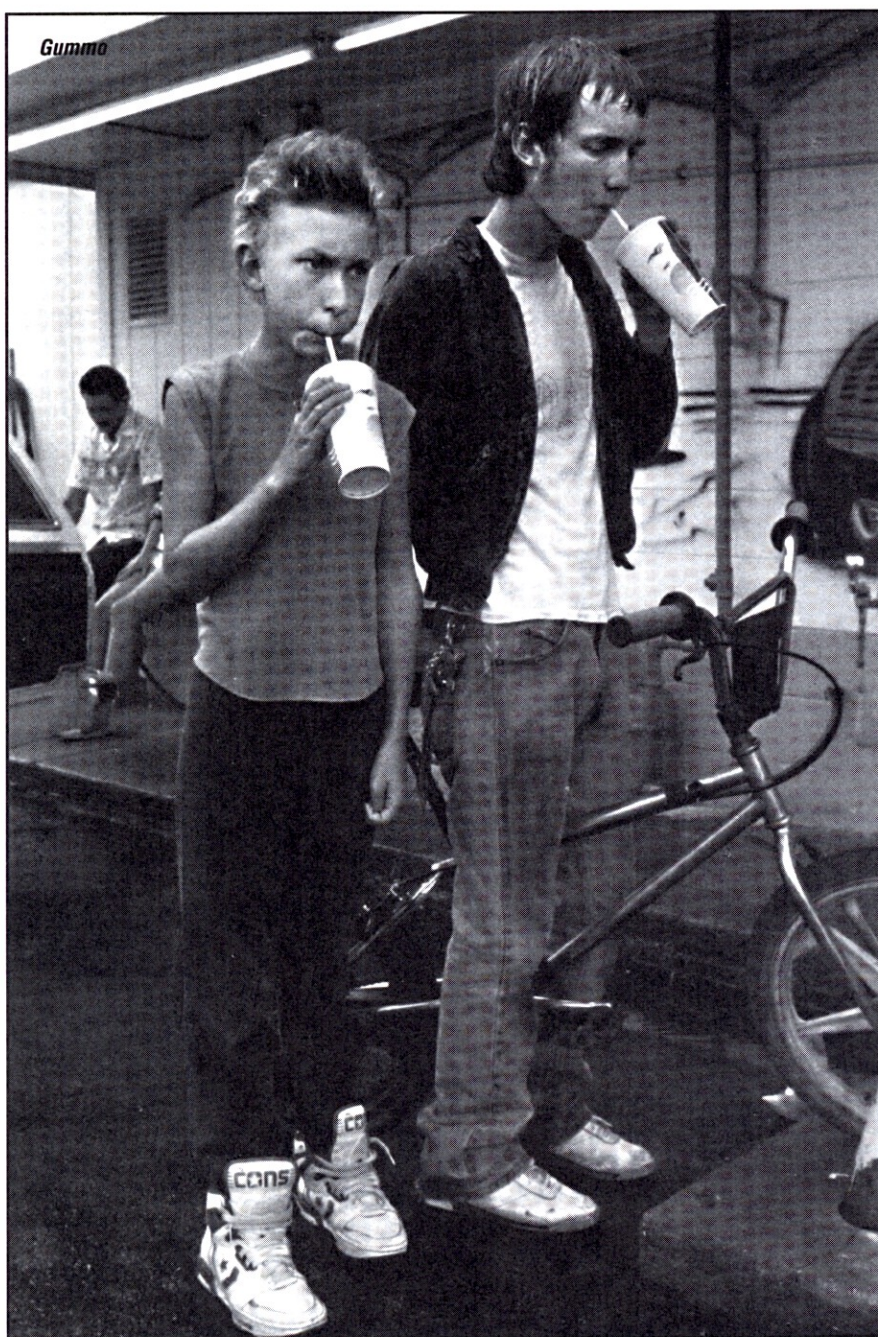
Nil By Mouth *Gummo*

by Susan Morrison

On the whole, my feeling was that this year's festival was much more interesting than last year's in terms of the calibre of films shown over the course of its 10 days duration. While the 1996 version had seemed compromised by its oversubscription to American 'mainstream' filmmaking, there was no similar tendency noticeable this year. The only actor/director (a rather lamentable trend last year) around was Gary

Oldman, who brought the remarkable *Nil By Mouth* to Toronto after its initial reception at Cannes last spring. Written as well as directed by the British actor, *Nil By Mouth* is an exceedingly difficult film to watch, not just because of the close attention that must be paid to decipher the South London working class dialect but also and mainly because of the intensity of the raw and brutal emotions displayed by almost all the (male) characters in their interactions with one another.

The film's narrative focuses on Ray/Ray Winstone, a particularly violent bully whose all too frequent irruptions destabilize the linearity of everyday life for his family, especially his wife Val/Kathy Burke, whom he torments one moment and professes love for, in the next. The narrative trajectory arrives



at a confrontation between the two in which the pregnant Val is beaten so severely that she loses the child, an event which determines her decision to save herself by leaving her husband.¹ What prevents this film from being unbearably unwatchable are the moments of tenderness and support the female characters share. Val, her mother and her young daughter provide for each other a kind of 'safe harbour' from the cruel world inhabited and to some extent created by their men. *Nil By Mouth* isn't about simplistic condemna-

tion of male violence, however. The characters never sink to the level of one-dimensional cartoon stereotypes of a masculinity burdened by overproductive testosterone. Ray, especially, is a fully fleshed out complex individual whose brutishness, though framed by way of geneological reference, is traced but not pardoned. A title at the close of the film dedicating it to Oldman's father comes at first as a shock (an *homage* to a monster?), but then on reflection, serves to add a poignancy to the narrative just unfolded as one places

the writer/director in the diegetic role of the (innocent) daughter witnessing the tragic events as they play themselves out. In this case, the complexity of a child's feelings for her(his) father is substituted for the more conventional outright condemnation.

There are directorial decisions evident in *Nil By Mouth* which indicate that Oldman is not just competent in the medium but in fact can use it in an innovative way to enhance and heighten the mood created by the narrative. For example, in many scenes, characters rarely appear together on screen. Even when they are in large groups, as in the opening scene which takes place in a crowded pub, individuals are tightly framed by the camera in closeup, with conversations cued by sequences of successive single-character closeups, never varying to a two-shot or even group-shots. The effect thus produced is overwhelmingly claustrophobic; the viewer's perspective controlled to a distinctly uncomfortable extent by the camera/director. Symbolically and brilliantly, characters locked in their violent world are paralleled by the viewer locked into the film frame.

Oldman as an actor has been a favorite of mine since I first saw him in Alex Cox's *Sid and Nancy*. However, he has seemed, of late, to be relegated to playing outrageously over-the-top bad guys in mediocre films. I certainly hope that *Nil By Mouth* is his way of overcoming the typecasting that has dogged him and that it indicates a new direction for his outstanding talents.

The other film (and filmmaker) that made a lasting impression on me at this year's Toronto Film Festival was *Gummo* by Harmony Korine. I went to the screening out of curiosity; a few years ago, Korine had written the screenplay for a film I had greatly admired, Larry Clark's *Kids*. Now, at the age of 23, he has written and directed his own film. As is customary at the public screenings, the director was not only present but introduced to the audience prior to the screening. A very young-looking kid wearing a sweatshirt whose tightly drawn hood covered most of his face went up to the mike, bobbing up and down, mumbled a few words no

one could understand, and quickly sat down. Not an auspicious beginning. However, by the time the film had concluded, and he got up again to answer questions, the hood had been removed and he seemed to have calmed down somewhat. An interesting performance followed. When asked a serious film question, as in "What filmmakers have influenced you" he answered, seriously and passionately; "Godard, Cassavetes, Eustache". When asked a 'dumb' film question, as in "How much did it cost to make *Gummo*", he answered in a straightforward fashion, "48 mil", eliciting a major laugh from the audience. At times it was hard to tell whether he was putting us on, or not. His responses seemed cogent but were so unconventional that it was hard to know what to think. When asked why the film was called 'Gummo'—there were no characters with that name nor was there any overt or covert reference to any of the Marx brothers—he replied that he'd always wondered why films were titled the way they are, and that his decision had been to 'name' his film as if he were naming a child. Hence, *Gummo*. His next film, he went on, could just as easily (and logically) be called 'Charlotte'.

Nevertheless, *Gummo* is an astounding film. It is so densely layered that it really requires repeated viewings in order to grasp much of what is going on. Although fiction, (and for the most part scripted ahead of time), *Gummo* has the appearance and feel of a documentary shot and edited by an experimental filmmaker; i.e. someone whose concern is not just an investigation of content but of form as well. Technically, the film is a collage of visual effects produced by varying the medium used: reshot tv footage (scan lines emphasized), film professionally shot with a handheld camera, film shot with a steadicam, super8mm. film shot by the director in pre-production, polaroid stills, and acquired video shot by amateurs on spec. for Korine. Audially, the collage motif prevails as well; we hear samples of Appalachian-style folk music, German industrial music, death metal, Madonna, neo-punk and even an old union song. This soundtrack fills in the spaces between those scenes that

contain dialogue and those which use a first-person voice-over narration, a narration that shifts voice (male to female) as it shifts subject (Solomon to Tumbler, identifiable character to unknown). In low whispery voices, the multiple narrators address us, their words sometimes relating specifically to what we are seeing (Solomon describing his memory of the tornado's effect on Xenia as we are shown what looks like actual tv footage of the event); at other times, the connection between narration and image is less specific (a female voice recounts a childhood memory of incest while the visual is of an older girl playing in a puddle).

Unlike a conventional film, in *Gummo*, we don't know/can't know where we're going. Korine has jettisoned a linear narrative in favour of a series of scenes loosely linked through place (Xenia, Ohio), time (20 years after its devastation by a tornado), character (mostly Xenia's adolescent inhabitants), and class (all the characters are literally dirt-poor). Formal structure comes from the recurring appearance of certain characters (Bunny Boy, Tumbler, Solomon, Dot and Helen) whose activities—motivated or otherwise—provide what narrative continuity there is in the film.

Shots of Bunny Boy/Jacob Sewell, a skateboarder clad only in shorts but wearing a pair of furry pink rabbit ears never explained by either the narrative or narration, both open the film—he's standing on a bridge over a roadway, and close it—he reappears in a field, running towards the camera holding a dead cat up to view. Tumbler/Nick Sutton, a scrawny, sweet-faced adolescent and his friend Solomon/Jacob Sewell, a younger lad with the most amazing appearance—no chin, very long nose, and what could only be described as a Woody Woodpecker haircut, ride their bikes through the town as they hunt and kill cats, which are then sold (as meat) for money to buy milkshakes, glue for sniffing, or a few moments with a dim-witted child prostitute pimped by her brother. But they have their code of honour: they're careful to kill only strays, not cats that belong to people. Dot/Chloe Sevigny



and Helen/Carisa Bara are two platinum-haired 'poor white trash' sisters whose activities run the gamut from a strange ritual for nipple-enlarging to the more mundane toenail painting and cat-washing. The object of their care and affection, a large black cat named Foot-Foot, is lost halfway through the film, only to reappear in the final shot of *Gummo* as the dead cat held aloft by Bunny Boy.

These characters and their actions are only a part of *Gummo's* narrative, however. The rest of it consists of fragments of varying lengths—from a single shot to extended scenes which serve to document Xenia's inhabitants as they

1. This particular scene resulted in an audible gasp among many audience members, some of whom walked-out of the screening. It is, indubitably, a very difficult scene to experience. I was reminded of a somewhat similar moment during a much weaker film screened last year, *Total Eclipse*, by Agnieszka Holland where one character, the French poet Verlaine/David Thewlis beats his pregnant wife. There, however, the action appeared ludicrously excessive rather than as an integral albeit painful moment in the film. The audience reacted by hissing and booing the film itself.

'endure' an impoverished life and lifestyle in Xenia... there seems to be no distinction between morning and afternoon, day or night. Time just rolls on, as does the collection of more-or-less outrageous characters that fill the screen; Eddie the gawky tennis player admired by Dot and Helen who attributes his success to a case of Attention Deficit Disorder; Gerald, the alternate cat-meat provider who takes care of a comatose grandmother while secretly harboring transvestite inclinations; an unnamed black dwarf who claims to be gay yet refuses, in what looks distinctly like heterosexual discomfort, to kiss a poor drunken sot (played by Korine himself in a cameo role) who just wants to be loved by someone; two young black boys immaculately dressed in suits and spotlessly clean (in fact practically the only characters in the entire film who are not covered in dirt) who have a scam selling chocolate bars door-to-door.

The majority of reviewers of *Gummo* have panned the film, pointing to the endless array of idiosyncratic characters

as proof that Korine's sole intention in making the film was to exhibit them as and for 'spectacle' in a cruelly exploitative way. One writer, for example, has depicted the film as "a *cinema verite* exercise in which a group of aimless white trash youths are paraded in front of the camera for all to gawk at. While the 23-year old Korine claims that Jean-Luc Godard is his idol, the film implies that it may actually be P.T. Barnum, as it has dozens of distorted humans to look at but nothing of much value to say."² As far as I'm concerned, however, this is not what *Gummo* is all about. To reduce it to the level of empty spectacle or exploitation film is not just to miss the complexity of its form and richness of its content, but also and perhaps more importantly to mistake the affection it displays for its characters for disdain.

The cue to a positive reading of *Gummo* may be found in the way in which the viewer is positioned in relation to the characters depicted on-screen. For a film to be exploitative, the viewer would have to be consciously

aware of being made to feel superior to them. This is not the case in *Gummo*. No matter how strange or even bizarre they may be, the characters are always believable, firmly located within a historical and economic (if not geographic) context, their actions circumscribed by their plight. Most of them, in the end, like most of us, are just looking for someone to care for them.

What seems to offend people most about *Gummo* is the inclusion of a female character who is in real life retarded. She appears on a number of occasions, both by herself—singing a children's song, shaving her eyebrows—and with others, together with Dot and Helen she watches Eddie practice tennis. But her retardedness is not made an issue of... she is treated like everyone else in the film, as somewhat odd, but nevertheless, a real person.

In a Rabelaisian or closer to home, the American 'tall-tale' tradition, there is at once a fondness for and exaggeration of the peculiarities of these people's lives. Cat-killing, for example, is one of the tropes in *Gummo* which gives it a



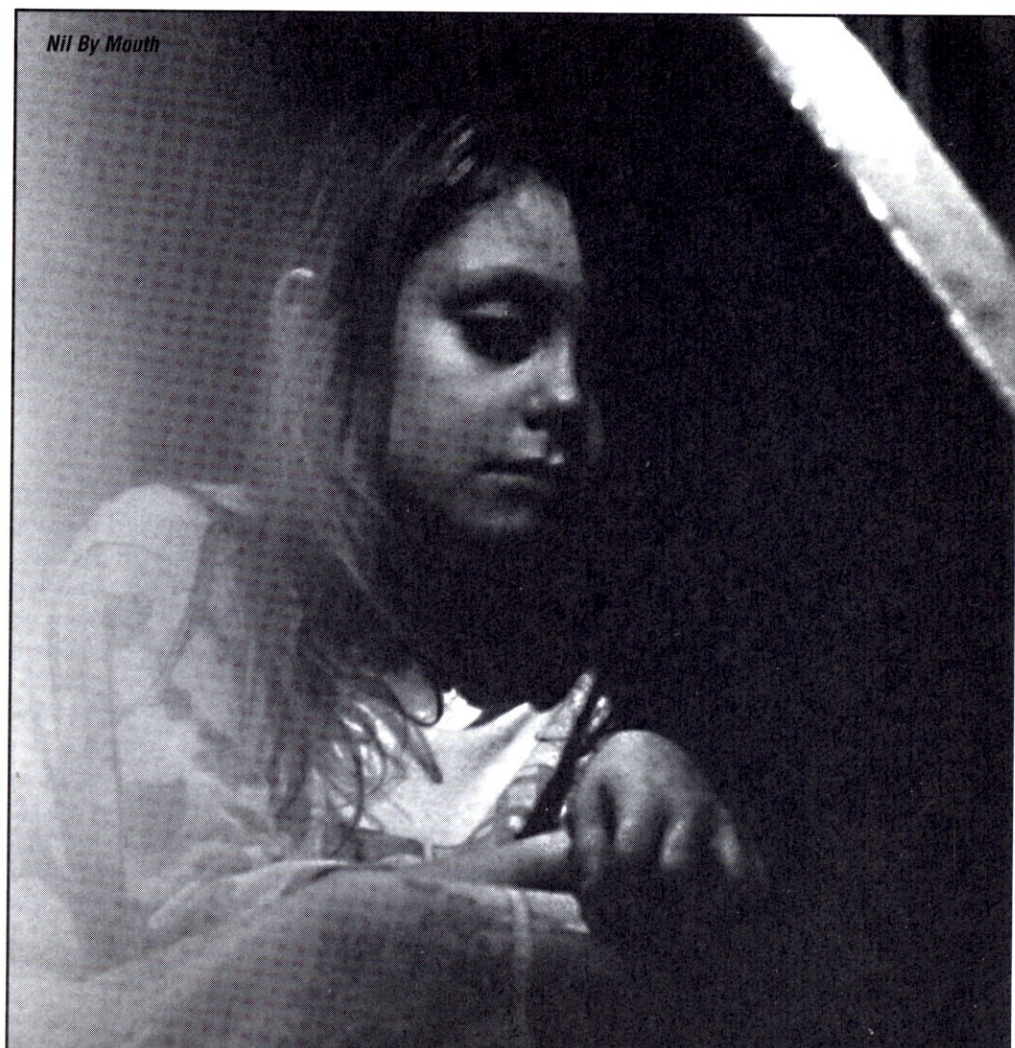
veneer of surreal horror. Solomon and Tumbler carry air rifles around with them in order to be able to shoot cats on sight, although the only time we see them using the guns, the cat is already dead and they are 'pretend'-shooting. In addition, one cat is drowned, another strung up and beaten; a third, already dead yet alive with flies and maggots, is prodded and stepped on. Gerald kills 'his' cats by feeding them broken glass. As with everything (and everyone) else in the film however, the killing and cat torture are done in such a laconic and deadpan kind of way that the accumulated effect is one of ethnographic awe rather than revulsion.

In the discussion after the screening, Korine dismissed recent American films for their lack of 'realism', and stated that realism, even if fictional, should be the dominant mode in filmmaking. *Gummo* is 'real' in the way that we are introduced to people's lives that are different from ours, not to belittle them but to locate them within our shared experience of human existence. Korine's earlier work, *Kids*, was a film which presented to its audience a filmic community of loosely connected urban adolescents whose values and actions were perhaps alien to adults but immediately real and recognizable for the youths watching. At its heart, it was an unusually moral film. *Gummo* is a much more audacious film, in that it reaches for more and risks more, especially at the formal level. This might explain why it's been championed by such contemporary *auteur* directors as Werner Herzog and Gus Van Sant in the face of emphatic dismissal by most critics³. As with Gary Oldman, Korine is a director who challenges his audiences in his commitment to film as a vehicle for more than mere entertainment. I look forward to second films from both.

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2. Jonathan Takagi, on Sat. Sept. 6, 1997, in the Screen-L film conference on the Internet.

3. cf. Werner Herzog's interview with Harmony Korine, 'Gummo's Whammo' in *Interview*, Brant Publications Inc., November 1997, and Gus Van Sant 'A Little Herzog, A Little Cassavetes', from the press kit for the film which may be obtained electronically on the Internet site for the film's distributor, Fine Lines.





TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL 1997

Exil Shanghai

by Florence Jacobowitz

Ulrike Ottinger's *Exil Shanghai* is a contemplation on the experience of the Jewish exile community in Shanghai, from the early part of the century through to 1950. The film is structured by a series of interviews (which appear almost as monologues as the interviewer is neither seen nor heard) with six former inhabitants of Shanghai now residing in California; they recount their experiences through testimony, drawing from memory and personal archives. These stories are illustrated with shots of the social life and visual landscape of

contemporary Shanghai, as well as surviving archival artifacts (furniture, newspapers, magazines, documents, photographs). Music of the era (much is by Jewish composers and songwriters, or Chinese renditions of 30s European music) is intercut with the sounds of the contemporary scenes, providing an aural bridge between past and present. This kind of visual and aural juxtaposition works to vivify the evocation of subjective memory and the experiences being recalled in an illustrative manner (many of the city's significant buildings that

line the harbourfront, the bleak area beyond the Garden Bridge described as Hongkew, the countryside, former shop signs, the harbour, remain recognizable and largely unchanged); however, even the shots of a very changed Shanghai still help visualize or comment upon experiential detail being described: What it might have felt like to arrive in a vibrant, cosmopolitan port, to have to acclimatize to the strangeness of a totally foreign culture, to confront the impoverished, squalid conditions of ghetto life. *Exil Shanghai* is, in part, a meditation on the experience of the exile/refugee, a particular historical moment which witnessed the confluence of several different communities and, in part, a travelogue or personal diary of an artist's present-day journey to a contemporary city which still fascinates. The film is intensely realistic, in the sense that it is committed to an accurate documentation of these persons' stories, and also poetic and dream-

like, lingering, for example, on recurring shots of a streetscape punctuated by colour and movement, a once-elegant interior of a hotel accompanied by 30s music, or a view of the sea and city skyline taken from a boat in the harbour. Some of these shots are very beautiful and mesmerizing and seem to communicate an otherworldliness appropriate to a visual embodiment of memory. This serves to mimic the wave-like form memory takes, which can be repetitive, undulating or elliptical, and can meander slowly or zero in sharply on one essential detail. This is one of the film's central strengths. It complements the participants' verbal recollections with a style which embodies memory travel. It is characterized by rhythmic longer takes which allow for contemplation, slow pans and tilts or travelling shots of the city landscape, the selective highlighting of an image with a pointed burst of colour, the repetition of particular images at various points in the film, the sound bridges using music from old shellac records in counterpoint with contemporary street sounds. The film exploits the cinema's potential to represent both perceptual reality and the imaginative oneiric aspects of subjectivity.¹

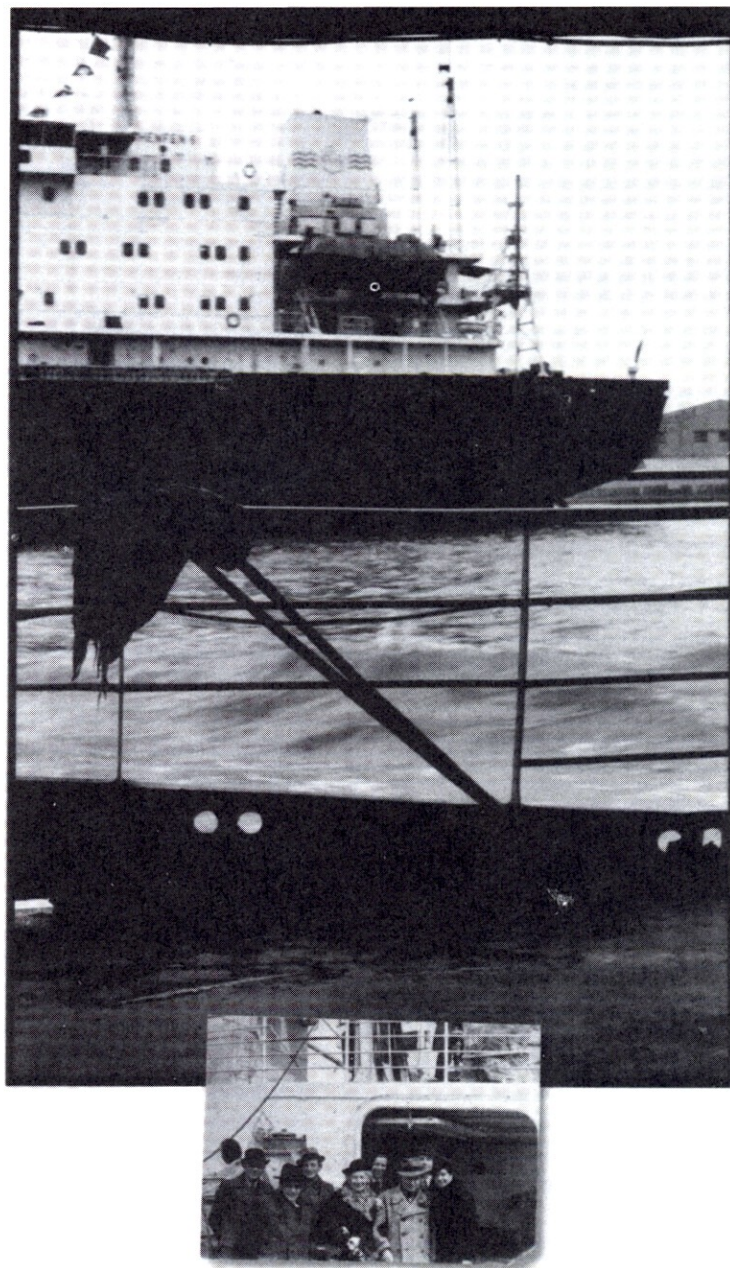
Ottinger's documentary shares an affinity with the post-war filmmaking practice of directors like Chris Marker and the 'Left Bank' group working in France in the 50s and 60s which included Georges Franju and Alain Resnais, as well as others like Roberto Rossellini and later Chantal Akerman. All of these directors experimented with films which can be thought of as personal documentaries—at once intensely subjective and biographical as well as 'realist'/objective in terms of their documentation of specific cities, their rendering of the strangeness of familiar environments through a form of distanced observation or their ability to capture a sense of spontaneity, an authentic voice or the immediacy of a particular historical moment. They freely blend fictional strategies—the use of narrative, figures of identification, a stylized mise-en-scène—with a documentary style used to observe the present and impart a sense of contemporaneity. This pro-

duces a very different notion of cinematic representation in that it recognizes (and thus validates) the inclusion of personal experiential details and memory within historical discourse and emphasizes a continuum between the present and the past.

Exil Shanghai might have taken a more familiar route, privileging, for example, a historical point (twenty thousand refugees arrived from Europe after 1937) and using the eyewitnesses to support the assertion. Instead it luxuriates in the telling of each individual's story; each is accorded roughly an hour (the Alexanders, a married couple, are interviewed together) which is why the film is close to five hours in length. The

intelligence and dignity of the participants help diminish one's sense of length of film time, and the static nature of the interviews. Some have complained of the resulting repetition as the stories overlap and details already mentioned are retold. This is because each individual account is more or less structured in the same way beginning with the Russian wave of emigration in the early part of the century or the arrival of refugees from Nazi Europe, followed by the war years, the aftermath of the war and their departure. The repetition is an

1. It is important to see these films in their proper format on a cinema screen because television/video screens minimize the visual impact of the imagery.



effective didactic tool; instead of having the film reconstruct a definitive historical portrait of the period, the viewer is asked to absorb historical facts in a different way. The basic skeletal structure becomes familiar—the Jewish community was spread across various national and ‘international’ settlements that divided the city; the Japanese occupation subsequently decreed that refugees from Europe must live in a controlled, designated zone in Hongkew; the exodus at the end of the war essentially emptied Shanghai of its Jewish community. However each individual memoir is also different, highlighting the distinct routes memory travel takes (remembering a token of chocolate given to calm a child on a kinder transport, travelling alone on a long journey to a far-off part of the world, the privileged life of pre-war colonial Shanghai, the parties, clubs, fashion and cinema). *Exil Shanghai* is generally reverential and nostalgic in its presentation of pre-war Shanghai as a place of Utopian promise because of the co-existence of many national groups, despite its reality as a bastion of colonialism. The use of 30s music, the emphasis on Shanghai’s grand hotels and night life recall pre-war Berlin, another cosmopolitan metropolis that evokes a similar mythified promise of freedom and openness. Those interviewed are nostalgic too for something of Shanghai which was never to be replicated, a city which had its distinct co-existing societies—American, French, Russian, British, Chinese—and, however colonial, was in character and spirit the antithesis of the kind of racist nationalism which led to the devastation of Europe. Shanghai was the last place of refuge which made no demands of visas, sponsorship, quotas, etc. If one could buy a ticket and find a spot on a ship one could escape, which was more than could be said for such democracies as the United States, Canada and almost every other ‘civilized’ country. The only rules were ones set by trade, the marketplace and commerce, and up until the Japanese occupation and the duration of the war years, life in Shanghai seemed to be characterized by, if not an integrated society, then, at the very least, some mutual tol-

erance of difference. Journals that were started by refugees, like *The Gelbe Post*, edited by Dr. Storfer, a student of Freud’s who ended up in Shanghai, were marked by a kind of intellectual curiosity which was borderless and seemed to characterize the community. These displaced persons were able to recreate their culture—their theatres, cabarets, journals—on whatever scale possible. Refugees who opened businesses replicated the familiar comforts (or as Geoffrey Heller says, ‘idiosyncracies’) of home and their cafés, restaurants, dress shops, coutouriers and furriers contributed to the eclectic nature of the city. Some of this material is juxtaposed with shots of the sameness or conformity evident in contemporary Shanghai—people are often portrayed in groups, in city parks and markets, in the bridal salon, on their bicycles or are represented in absentia by the endless clothesline poles that fill the city. Other times vestiges of the spirit of 30s internationalism remain—in a vaguely Bauhaus-looking building, in a shop sign advertising Siberian furriers. These juxtapositions are at times surreal and jarring, and at times evocative of the way the city is still haunted or invigorated with a life force supplied by its history, something which still illuminates the heavily neon-lit night shots and makes the promises of change in the air seem possible.

Although the former inhabitants of Shanghai are being filmed close to fifty years following their departure from the city, they too seem to have remained marked by their sojourns in Shanghai. The film visually reinforces this through the choice of mise-en-scène. Chinese iconography, furnishings and accoutrements fill the residences in California where each person is filmed, and the settings appear carefully staged. (At times this seems contrived and even stereotyped, notably in the section concerning Georges Spunt, a gay man who was very involved in the fashion world in Shanghai. He is introduced as a framed mirror reflection, surrounded by an inexplicably large number of lit candles.) The interviews seem to be guided by questions and topics; however the filmmaker doesn’t intrude overtly. Instead, the artist’s intervention and

commentary are evident in the connections the film makes between what is remembered and specifically chosen aspects of the contemporary city. Mostly, this strategy works; however there are instances where the links are more tenuous and less successful. A mention of marriage, for example, is followed by a cut to a long sequence illustrating present-day rituals of marriage preparations (the wedding costumes, staging wedding portraiture, etc.). While the sequence is not devoid of interest it is not particularly illuminating and seems oddly tacked on. Another example follows Inna Mink’s memory of her teacher chastising her for disrupting the class with her impersonation of herself as a future movie star, and his claiming that she is more likely fated to be a fishwife. This is then linked to shots of a contemporary fish market. While some of these connections are clumsy, others are more successful, for example, a discussion of the refugee-owned restaurant “Fiaker”, which served the best Viennese food, is also followed with a cut to a present-day food market. This juxtaposition works to underline the foreignness of the market and suggests the difficulty of arriving and stocking a restaurant preparing Viennese delicacies with food supplied by the indigenous Chinese market.

Given the film’s emphasis on the Jewish community specifically, it is odd that there are few memories of how, for example, the three synagogues in Shanghai were used or attended and few memories of Jewish observances or holidays (though Inna Mink briefly recalls attending a Jewish school). There is no reference, for example, to the vestiges of the various rabbinical seminaries which found refuge in Shanghai. The film is allowed omissions because it never pretends to be definitive or provide an all-inclusive portrait (and memoirs are biased); nevertheless these details are not insignificant. The Shanghai community became a microcosm of a decimated European Jewry and a kind of multi-faceted cultural life which was never again fully rekindled or recovered. Its brief existence as a transitional place of refuge is particularly precious because it represented the end of an era. The



omission is therefore noticeably lacking, given the number of respected archival facilities that were consulted and acknowledged in the credits. One other point of criticism I feel needs to be addressed, however hesitantly, is that the film's romanticism tends to colour the hardships of refugee life. The film's treatment of ghetto life in Hongkew is a case in point. Of the six interviewed, three actually experienced ghetto life first hand, the Alexanders and Geoffrey Heller (and the two men worked outside the ghetto). Although the community's suffering is not overlooked, the Alexanders primarily remember the period fondly as the time and setting of their courtship. Many survivors of this internment were extremely traumatized by what they witnessed and the desperate conditions endured. In an interview Ms. Ottinger discusses the problems of

emigration generally and mentions the fact that "for many emigrants, this new situation resulted in total disorientation. Human networks collapsed, European values no longer mattered here."² More of this could have been included. Perhaps all of those interviewed were of an age that enabled them to cope with extreme change, and to view their experience, as Mr. Heller recalls, as 'an adventure'.

Having said this, I must admit to being as fascinated as the filmmaker and the participants seem to be by the aura of this extraordinary moment in Shanghai's history and by "the juxtaposition of exotic and fantastic things" as Mr. Heller so aptly describes it. This is reflected in the vivacious film culture that existed and the strong influence it exerted on the city's social and cultural life. As the film notes, the era's promise was embodied by stars like Marlene

Dietrich and Anna May Wong (and the story recounted by Rena Krasno of the latter's exclusion from entering an American club when she visited the city because of her distinction as Chinese underlines the reality impinging on the myth). I am drawn to the cosmopolitan vibrancy of city life fuelled by the many nationalities and cultures that enriched it, and by the uniqueness of Shanghai to have existed as a place of refuge when every other door slammed shut.

The value of this kind of cinematic rendering is in its ability to recall an era in history without relinquishing the individual perspectives that bring it to life. Ms. Ottinger's interpretation of documentary realism validates it as a form that can yet accommodate the call for an aesthetic appropriate to the act of remembering.

2. Interview with Ulrike Ottinger by Sissi Tax, *internationales forum des jungen films*, Berlin 1997

Thanks to Mr. André Bennett of Esperanza Films, *Exil Shanghai's* distributor, who made it possible for me to view the film again.

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TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL 1997

REVOLUTIONARY LOVE AND POST-COMMUNIST MURDER

Amor Vertical *A Friend of the Deceased*

by Scott Forsyth

Two films at the Festival from Ukraine and Cuba offered entertaining and provocative explorations of love, suicide and individualism in the tumultuous uncertainties and economic traumas of their respectively post-Communist and still-Communist countries. For both Arturo Sotto Díaz and Viatcheslav Krichtofovitch, their narratives of lust and despair are grounded in social consequences internationally familiar in the so-called new world order of the triumph of globalizing capitalism. *Amor Vertical* is set in a crumbling Havana, battling shortages and decay, struggling to maintain the legacy and solidarity of the Revolution, but marked by the excesses of new entrepreneurs and the inertia of old bureaucrats. The post-Soviet Kiev of *A Friend of the Deceased* is not that dissimilar. Here, the post-Communist economic collapse has destroyed much of the legacy of the Revolution and the new entrepreneurs are creating a brutal bandit capitalism. In both films, the audience engages with the social terrain through intriguing, even difficult, characters as they struggle with the contradictions of their historical moment; grim as this sounds, both films are firstly hilarious satires, of their respective national dilemmas, but broadly accessible from outside.

Each film, as well, needs to be seen as the product of a national cinema dramatically effected by these same economic and social crises. The famed Cuban film institute, ICAIC, can only produce one or



Three scenes from *Amor Vertical*

two features a year and must struggle to secure international co-productions. Any film, in that movie-loving nation, must address, in a popular and entertaining fashion, the crisis and the tremendous tensions individuals and the society as a whole are undergoing. In the Ukraine, the Soviet film industry has completely collapsed, almost no films are being made

and the cinema audience has almost disappeared. Krichtofovitch's film is a European co-production, obviously about the new realities but perhaps less confident of its audience or even its intentions.

Estela and Ernesto, the Cuban lovers, meet when she attempts suicide. She is an ambitious architecture student, studying housing in crumbling Old Havana. Her

innovative plans are rejected by a particularly inane bunch of bureaucrats, so often skewered in Cuban films, and she decides to end it all. He is a nurse at the hospital who routinely poses as a psychiatrist to seduce pretty patients. As well, he repeatedly deceives the older woman he lives with, who loves him passionately and feeds him lavishly (a luxurious advantage in shortage-straitened Cuba). Ernesto is played with great vivacity by Jorge Perugorria, familiar from *Strawberry and Chocolate* and *Guantanamo*, as a charming chauvinist greatly in need of sensitive transformation, a frequent figure in revolutionary Cuban films. The lovers begin a desperately funny search for a place to consummate their growing passion, thwarted by Estela's maniacally patriarchal father, her uncle who has become a corrupt Catholic priest, the Havana housing shortage—a house that falls apart from their embraces - and a shortage of US dollars. The obstacles are increasingly surreal and absurd and the tone is madcap - the amusing combination of Bunuel and Hollywood slapstick Cuban comedies have mastered for many years - and the search literally climaxes in a stalled elevator - hence the film's title.

The vertical tryst is both strikingly steamy and a comic tour-de-force, as the lovers sexual energy manages to bring much of Havana to a farcical standstill. From there, the narrative's libidinal propulsion idles as the lovers set up house in a lean-to on a river, a temporary answer for their personal housing shortage, but an idyll outside the social that cannot last. Even here, bureaucrats, shortages and family intrude and the lovers must resolve their romance as they re-engage with their society, and, for Ernesto, confront his selfishness and lies. Heterosexual romance is not simply the resolution; it is love within the Revolution. The painful tension of individual desires and social constraint has become entertainingly dialectical.

For Anatoli in Kiev, his individual place in his society - both in love and work - has disappeared. His advertising executive wife is thriving in the new economic order and soon leaves him. He struggles to get by translating for the new Mafia/capitalists but sinks into ennui and despair. He is presented as weak but



A Friend of the Deceased

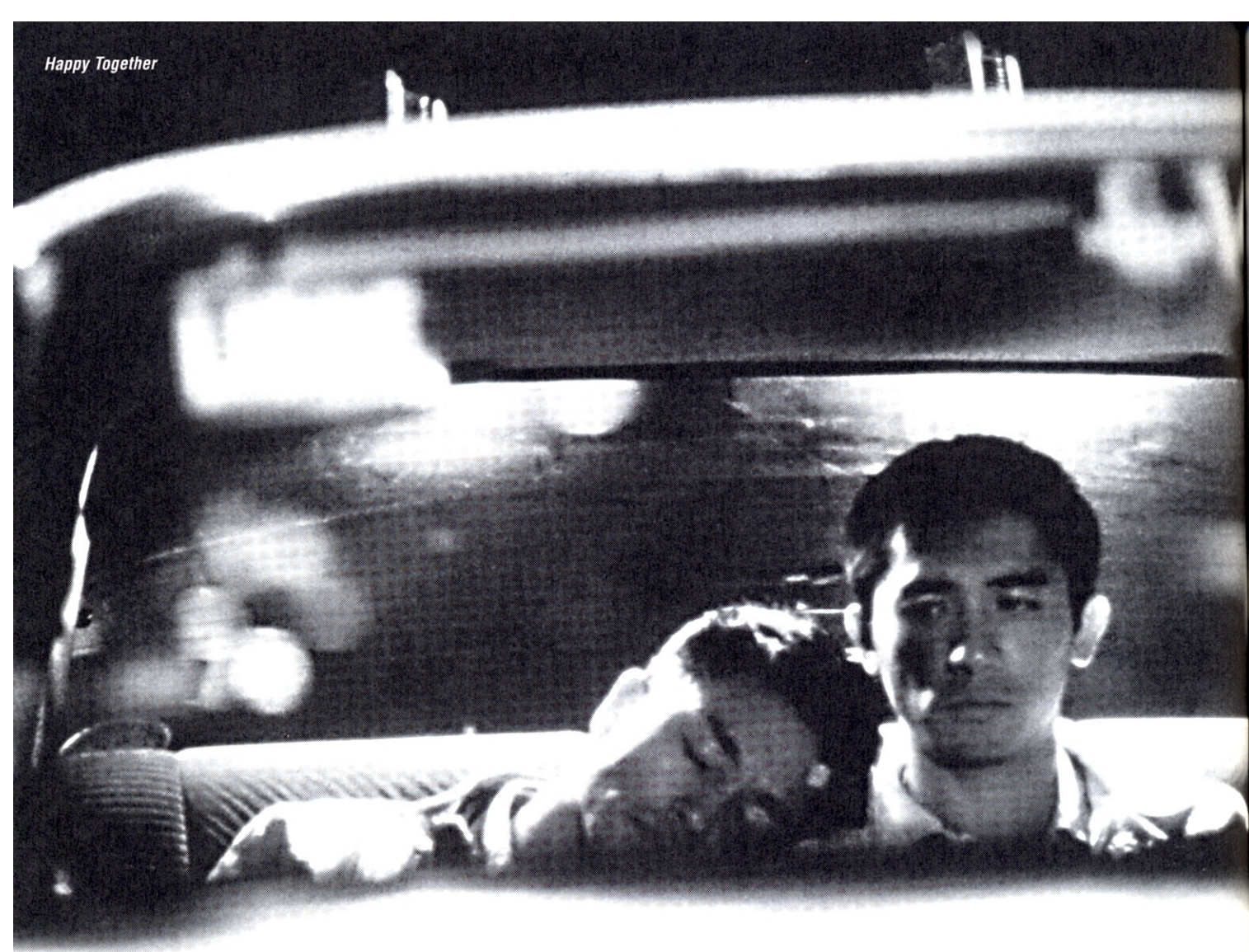
refined, intelligent but indolent, a character who can't find a place as society collapses and transforms around him. He is mocked perhaps for not adapting—the neo-liberal orthodoxies of the new world order do not allow him, or the filmmaker, to imagine any alternatives - but our sympathies are doubtless with his shrugging refusal of the falsities demanded of him. Eventually, he decides suicide is the way out but, without the initiative to do it himself, hires one of Kiev's many available contract killers to do the job. However, a night with a prostitute with something like the proverbial heart of gold, gives Anatoli a more spirited, if only slightly, take on life and he must now confront a killer who takes his contracts seriously. In the brutal scrambling of post-Soviet Kiev, the solution is, of course, another contract killer. The film manages a disquieting balance between farce and horror—our laughter catches in our throats. The guilt-racked Anatoli tries to help the widow and baby of the killer he has had killed, to become *A Friend of the Deceased*. For a while, it seems, a touching romance is starting, but gradually we see, in the ugly Social Darwinism of the new Kiev, that he has taken on both business and family obligations for the "friend" he has murdered. In a brilliant concluding freeze-frame, in chillingly ironic answer to his initial dislocation in love and work. Anatoli is locked in place, as husband, father and killer.

The film is a perfectly plotted parable. The ineffectual intellectual, beautifully underplayed by Alexandre Lazarev —

even lifting an eyebrow sometimes looks agonisingly beyond him—becomes an anomic, but authentic, archetype of a nation not really adapting to a disappointing and uncertain transition. As a kind of "national allegory" of Ukraine in decline, the film is a clever riposte to the utopian capitalist rhetoric of the politicians and Mafiosi. Its social critique is grounded in a kind of paradoxical nostalgia; Russian Stalinism at least provided a kind of solidarity compared to the vacuous "freedoms" of the marketplace—"friendship disappeared with our glorious Soviet past...today there are only business relations." Anatoli finds a kind of solace in the cafes and bars of the old city, a glimmer of the affirmative that lets him at least choose life over death. But of course, in these drastically wizened social circumstances, his desire to be a friend lets him "succeed" in business despite himself.

For the Cuban lovers, the tensions between individuals and what their society allows them still offers a hopeful way forward; the unexpected power of sexual passion can almost transform the social—even now, "Communism with cha cha cha." In Kiev, the confrontation between individual values and character and social hopelessness, at least for the disaffected intelligentsia, promises only the dark humour of going on.

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TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL 1997

GAY MOVIES, WEST AND EAST

In & Out *Happy Together*

by **Richard Lippe**

Judging from the mainstream media, we have reached a post AIDS environment in North America and, according to some of its critics, our society has moved to a post-gay-and-lesbian mentality. In a fairly recent weekend edition of Toronto's most upscale newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, 'The Arts' section featured a headline proclaiming, "We're here. We're queer. You love it."¹ The article's author, Johanna Schneller, claims that in both television (e.g., *Ellen*) and film (e.g., *My Best Friend's Wedding*), positive images of lesbians and gays are seen and that there isn't any longer an overriding opposition to such depictions; she says, "Gains and losses often cancel each other out: one day some local television stations refuse to air an episode in which Ellen kisses a friend (or Roseanne kisses a lesbian, or females kiss on *Star Trek*) because of protests from conservative groups; the

next day, because of protests by homosexuals, those shows are back on the air." Arguably, the notion that lesbians and gays are highly visible and accepted by the straight world is in big part due to Ellen DeGeneres' much-publicized coming out and by the openly gay Rupert Everett playing a major role as a gay character with romantic/hero connotations in the mainstream romantic comedy *My Best Friend's Wedding* starring Julia Roberts, whose image is very much associated with heterosexuality and female desirability. On the one hand, it is highly appealing to think that queers are being given a high profile in mass culture and these images are attractive and, with DeGeneres, that she has the potential to develop a lesbian character on her television show who can express homosexual desire. But the present success of actors such as DeGeneres and Everett has also led to

concerns among members of the gay cultural community that what has been occurring the last several years is a gradual assimilating of lesbians and gays into mainstream society. This process has made sexual difference chic and therefore commercial but it also functions to promote the notion that homosexual and heterosexual identity experience is becoming interchangeable.

Interestingly, the issue of lesbian and gay assimilation into mass culture has also been aired recently in another of the city's mainstream newspapers, *The Toronto Star*. In an article entitled "The new degenerates" five of the most prominent gay members of Toronto's arts community, including ex-*CineAction* collective member Bryan Bruce (aka Bruce La Bruce), voiced their concern that homosexual identity as depicted in the mainstream media is boring, safe, and/or dictated by practical demands such as equal rights². Instead, they argue for the return of the concept of the gay artist as a person who challenges socio-cultural norms through his (or her) sexual/creative transgression.

The above-mentioned newspaper articles, of which I have offered very broad descriptions, express the current attitudes regarding homosexuals and the mainstream media. When compared, the articles offer contrasting positions that end up being mutually exclusive, while what is needed is a more balanced view. Given that homosexuals had been denied a formal existence in North American films for many years and, then, when censorship guidelines were relaxed in the 1960s, were presented in primarily negative roles as neurotic and sick people, it cannot be easily assumed that we now have a reverse problem, that is, homosexuals, as seen in films and on television, are too 'normal' to be taken as representative of their real-life counterparts. It is of course legitimate to demand that homosexuals are depicted as people having sexual desires and emotional needs that are equal to those felt by heterosexuals and that we are given respect for our individual contributions to society, even if these contributions don't conform to heterosexual norms. And, in addition to being granted the right to

openly live a sexual life, lesbians and gays should be able to share in the social, economic and legal benefits given to straight people. To anyone who grew up gay in the 1950s or 1960s, it is evident that a more tolerant and accepting environment is desirable. It is also clearly evident that in the present day we are a far way from having reached the position where homophobia is no longer an issue.

It could, of course, be argued that any single image representing a homosexual person in a socio-cultural context is limiting and works to set up or reinforce a stereotype. But since the late 1960s and the Stonewall riots, a process of socialization has begun, and it has increasingly led to greater diversity of lesbian and gay images in circulation. These images can be appropriated by both homosexuals and straights and, in this sense, homosexuals are in much the same position as women and blacks, who have found it difficult to deal with the implications arising from the relations developed between socio-political positioning and cultural image making. For instance, in the last thirty years, feminism has managed to challenge patriarchy but the movement has been also used in ways that exploit its successes—in the 1990s, we are told that North American society has produced a post-feminist condition. This idea is dependent on a number of highly problematic images of supposedly liberated women who are depicted in the media (most often in television commercials

and magazine advertisements) as having the freedom to make the professional and personal choices they want. (The image frequently used is that of the careerist who manages to be sexy, competitive and successful in the male business world and equally in control of her personal relations, fulfilling her desires and needs as a woman.) In reality, women continue to struggle for social and economic equality and their sexual identity is still primarily controlled by heterosexual men. While it is problematic to conflate feminist and homosexual agendas, it is nevertheless valid to acknowledge that these movements share concerns particularly in the area of challenging patriarchy's attempt to regulate sexual definition and self-expression.

The five interviewees featured in "The new degenerates" article are male and the assumption they seem to hold to is that the gay artist creates work which is an assault on socio-cultural norms. The notion aligns gay art with the avant-garde or elitist art; in earlier decades of this century this was often the case and especially so in the fields of literature, theatre and poetry. But, while the function of any artist, whatever his or her sexual orientation, can be seen as contributing to the enrichment of our creative, aesthetic, intellectual and political life, it doesn't necessarily follow

1 *The Globe and Mail*, Saturday, November 8, 1997; Section C, pages C1, C3.

2 *The Toronto Star*, Saturday, October 18, 1997; Section J, pages J3, J18.



Happy Together



In & Out

that this demands a rejection of mainstream culture. In regard to queer artists, the present day is extremely intriguing as it is now possible, as people like DeGeneres, Everett and others have shown, to achieve popular recognition and acceptance as a lesbian or gay artist/performer. This is still a new phenomenon and it remains open as to what queer artists working in the mainstream can accomplish by integrating their sexuality and identity into their creative lives. In addition, as film and television are collaborative forms, it is possible for the queer and straight artist to work together openly on projects that are progressive regarding lesbian and gay identity. Cultural production has always owed a lot to queers and this tradition isn't necessarily jeopardized with the introduction of the lesbian or gay artist who attempts to employ and/or exploit the conventions of mass media formats. And, from another perspective, I don't think it is the case, as is contended in "The new degenerates" article, that as AIDS has effectively killed off a generation of queer creativity, a vacuum has been produced which is being filled by gays and/or straights who lack the vision, talent and intelligence to fully realize the significance of queer identity to self-definition and cultural production. Again, while these concerns are not without basis, it is also important to recognize that significant socio-political changes have occurred within the last fifteen years because of queers struggling on numerous social

and cultural fronts and this process isn't inherently circumscribed by either commercial interests or ideological forces.

As I mentioned earlier, we are now supposedly in a post-AIDS situation—the term seems more acceptable if we consider it to mean that the crisis period has passed and that the mention of AIDS, because of the continuation of safe sex practices in the gay community and medical advances, no longer conjures up panic, fear and death. In regard to gay culture, it is time to move beyond the identification of gays with AIDS which began happening in the early to mid-1980s. Although this period has produced a number of works, including *Longtime Companion*, *Philadelphia*, *Love! Valor! Compassion!*, *Jeffrey*, *It's My Party*, admirable in their own right and heart-felt statements, the more recent shift to the presentation of gays in a broader social definition and less sombre context is highly welcome. Mid-1990s gay-themed films which aren't centred on the AIDS issue, however, have been less successful, with the pallid and belaboured *The Birdcage* and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* being the most highly touted. In contrast to the staleness of these comedies which recycle formulaic drag humour situations, there is Frank Oz's and Paul Rudnick's inventive *In & Out*.

In & Out sets its playful tone in the introductory sequence providing the viewer with a glimpse of small town USA, Greenleaf, Indiana, where Howard Brackett/Kevin Kline teaches

literature at the local high school. The idyllic and old-fashioned picture of life in Greenleaf suggests that the film isn't exactly set in the modern world; it lends itself to the notion of the fairy tale, a "Once upon a time..." story. This cosy vision of American life is disrupted when former student Cameron Drake/Matt Dillon, now a Hollywood star, makes an Academy Award acceptance speech in which he 'outs' Howard, which in turn leads to the arrival of Peter Malloy/Tom Selleck, a high-powered television journalist determined to exploit the situation as a media event. The issue of 'outing' gives the film a more contemporary feel and Rudnick claims the screenplay was inspired by Tom Hanks's best actor award acceptance speech, another factor which relates the film to present-day reality. The fairy tale quality of the film allows for a greater credibility regarding the Howard Brackett character, a middle-aged man who is still incapable of facing the fact that his sexual desires don't conform to what his family, the community and he himself thinks are appropriate to a man who is respectable and committed to his professional life. Although Howard is on the verge of marrying his longtime girlfriend and professional colleague, Emily Montgomery/Joan Cusack, he hasn't entirely managed to suppress his gay identity, manifest in such giveaways as an obsession with Barbra Streisand movies and disco music. *In & Out* isn't concerned with the ethics of 'outing' but it does suggest that Howard's outing is beneficial to both him and Emily and their respective future lives. The television outing is presented more as a catalyst which leads Howard to a self-confrontation, and it is his own public admission that is really important. The notion that outing the self is a liberating and positive experience is taken up later in a very funny scene in which Howard's mother, played by Debbie Reynolds, and her friends decide to tell the truth about personal experiences they have kept a secret, fearing social embarrassment or rejection. While the film avoids involving itself in ethics, it manages pointedly to allude to Hollywood celebrities and the closet by



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the inspired casting of Tom Selleck as a gay character. Selleck himself was involved in the early 1990s in an outing by a tabloid, *The Globe*; the actor denied he was gay and successfully sued the paper. Selleck's presence in *In & Out* places the entire outing procedure in relief. (The Peter Malloy character seems to be open about being gay during this stay in Greenleaf although the film never claims that he has gone public about his sexual orientation in his professional life.)

In addition to using outing as a means to address the need to be open about one's identity, *In & Out* takes up stereotyping, foregrounding its absurdity. It isn't until after Howard has been outed that his students begin questioning his clothing and personal behavioural codes—Howard is told that he is too neat and his biking to school doesn't look well if he is to be taken as a real man. His students' criticisms regarding his masculine image raise, as the viewer

discovers, Howard's own fears that he comes across as a 'sissy'. This fear is given its full weight when Howard, after being kissed on the mouth by Peter Malloy, goes home to play a self-help tape which instructs him on the cultivation of a macho image. The sequence is wonderfully conceived as Howard and the 'therapist' on the tape verbally interact, the latter increasingly telling Howard that he must contain his physical impulses and not let go. The sequence culminates in Howard's defiant and celebratory dance to disco music. It is the moment that Howard fully accepts his gay identity and refuses to worry about imaging and stereotyping.

Howard's experiences with stereotyping are paralleled by Emily: she has spent years dieting to become svelte, an aspect of the stereotype of the feminine, hence marriageable, woman. Like Howard, when Emily realizes that her efforts to construct a socio-cultural

ideal image are self-defeating, she too rebels. Emily's rebellion is expressed in eating, but it also leads to her (re)meeting the 'Prince Charming' she is looking for, in the form of Cameron Drake who, in turn, has been involved with a high fashion model, the prototype of the stereotype, who, aside from her 'feminine' body image, has no identity; and it turns out that Cameron, an ex-high school student of Emily's, fully reciprocates the attraction.

As a gay-themed mainstream film, *In & Out* fits into the current emphasis on using comedy to deal with its subject-matter. The strategy is a longstanding tradition but, interestingly, the film that *In & Out* evokes in certain ways is the pre-AIDS and provocatively entitled melodrama *Making Love* (1982). More specifically, I am thinking of the male kissing scene that the films share. In *Making Love*, Harry Hamlin's and Michael Ontkean's sexual relationship is initiated with a close-up of a kiss on

the lips. In 1982, the image elicited a shocked response from the audience, whereas the kiss between Kline and Selleck in *In & Out* has been taken in stride. (The audience I saw the film with were delighted by the scene.) Nevertheless, the Kline-Selleck kiss is audacious in terms of what is shown in contemporary Hollywood films in regard to men and same sex relations. Not only is the kiss unexpected, it is protracted as Kline initially is too shocked to respond and only gradually surrenders to his desires and reciprocates. The kiss functions metaphorically as Kline's initiation into homosexual pleasure and is immediately followed by the sequence in which he attempts to suppress his sexual self through playing the self-help tape.

While the image of two men kissing and celebrating their sexual identity is the most striking connection between *In & Out* and *Making Love*, the films also share a narrative concern regarding heterosexual relations. In *Making Love*, the heterosexual relationship is treated in a highly romantic fashion and a great part of the film is devoted to the failure of the relationship and its aftermath particularly from the woman's point of view. It is suggested that the Kate Jackson character, who loses Ontkean to Hamlin, isn't by the film's conclusion fully reconciled to the loss although she has built a new life with another man. *Making Love* takes a bittersweet attitude towards the issue; in contrast, in *In & Out* the treatment of the Kline-Cusack relationship is presented in a much less ambivalent manner. As I suggested, the film stresses that Kline's acceptance of his sexual orientation is to be seen in positive terms. It also affords Cusack the opportunity to move beyond seeing herself as the victim of male exploitation, but does so without denying her anger and disappointment. Given the comedic nature of the film, it is to the credit of Rudnick, Oz and Cusack that Emily and her situation are sensitively handled. Although Cusack's Emily is a comic character, her vulnerability is always apparent. In the aftermath of Kline's wedding ceremony declaration that he can't marry her, the film shifts its emphasis to Emily's reaction

to the situation. After Emily physically expresses anger at Howard, she flees the church and winds up at a roadside bar where she encounters Peter Malloy, who tells her that he too is gay. The (humorous) indignities she has undergone are undone with the sudden appearance of Cameron Drake. Emily's and Cameron's after dark roadside encounter is beautifully conceived, with a tonal shift from absurdist comedy to a tender love scene in which Emily, still wearing her bridal gown, dances with Cameron in the glow of car headlights to Patsy Cline's "Crazy". The film doesn't sentimentalize heterosexual love and yet it respects Emily and her need to be desired and treated romantically.

As in its usage of Tom Selleck, *In & Out* is very self-conscious about the media in the way it satirizes television journalism, Hollywood films and the Academy Awards (the film Cameron wins an Oscar for is a hilarious send up of military films, *Platoon* and *A Few Good Men*, and allows for a pointed comment of the US government's 'don't ask, don't tell' policy with Cameron's character being charged at a court-martial with having an autographed video copy of Bette Midler's *Beaches* in his locker) and gay icons, particularly Streisand. In *Making Love*, gay culture was also highly present with the characters watching classical Hollywood romantic films such as *An Affair to Remember* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In *Making Love*, these culture products are treated with a certain reverence, as are the characters and their concerns; in contrast, *In & Out* refuses to idolize Howard's favorite diva. In fact, Streisand is subjected to criticism on various fronts: one of Howard's male friends says she was too old to play the *Yentl* role, and Emily, after being jilted by Howard at the church, launches a complaint regarding the number of times she had to sit through *Funny Lady*. When Howard attempts to defend Streisand, Emily yells "Fuck you and fuck Barbra Streisand", and then punches him in the jaw. *In & Out*, while acknowledging its affection for gay culture, deflates the investment gays make in iconic imagery.

In & Out, in its satirical attitude



Happy Together

toward American society, evokes a Preston Sturges comedy. It is not difficult to see the Kline and Cusack roles played respectively by Eddie Bracken and Betty Hutton in a 1940s version of this material, though of course 1940s Hollywood couldn't have addressed the topic. I am not suggesting that *In & Out* is as subversive as a Sturges film like *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*. On the other hand, *In & Out* manages to be a keenly observed exercise on the often absurd aspects of America's ideology regarding such issues as the small town, innocence, the family and heterosexuality. For instance, early on the Reynolds character tells Howard that she wants a wedding whatever it takes. In the penultimate scene, Howard and Peter are together dressing for a formal occasion, and it is possible to read the image as alluding to their forthcoming nuptial union, which would be inconsistent with both the characters' relationship as presented and what is legally possible in America. The Howard/Peter scene is followed by a marriage, but it is the remarriage of Reynolds and Howard's father. Reynolds gets her wish even if it is she herself that produces the marriage. The image summarizes perfectly the way in which the American family and its ethic manages to sustain itself despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

With its sly humour *In & Out* avoids being didactic about its celebration of 'otherness' although, arguably, the film comes close to being so in the graduation day sequence, in which the homophobic members of the high school, including its principle played by Bob Newhart, conspire to rid the school of Howard and what he now represents. The sequence can be read as an attempt to (re)assimilate Howard into the family, school and community; in response to Newhart's dismissal, the students and eventually the adult members of the community, led on by Cameron, defend Howard by proclaiming themselves to be gay so that he no longer is an outsider. While the sequence carries assimilating connotations, it is presented more as an exercise in combating homophobia. In part, this is accomplished by the elaborate building of the

sequence so that it takes on a meaning which isn't simply intended to neutralize Howard's gay identity. The insistent refrain 'I am gay too' becomes a protest chant that celebrates 'difference' which is what Howard's gayness means in the context of Greenleaf, Indiana USA. The celebratory conclusion of the sequence is reprised in the film's final moments as the entire town/community, including the Newhart character and his supporters, participate in the reception following Reynolds's wedding, the boisterous dance in which all the major and supporting characters are 'privileged' through shots acknowledging their presence.

In & Out is a modest film which succeeds in its goal to entertain and make a social statement. Paul Rudnick's screenplay is well-constructed, and the film is clear-minded about its intentions and scale. While it would be appropriate to give Rudnick credit for the film's political edge (Rudnick is openly gay and his films include *Addams Family Values* and *Jeffrey* which he wrote originally as a play), *In & Out* is very much a collaborative effort. The underlying sweetness of the film is partly due to Oz and his ability to get his actors to maintain their humanity while creating characters that could be either offensive (Howard and Peter) and/or caricatures (Emily). It is, also, a film which isn't condescending to any of its characters or self-congratulatory about its subject matter, and it greatly benefits from the comedic skills of Kline and Cusack who give performances that are a highly accomplished amalgamation of farce and nuanced characterization.

In the broad spectrum offered by the Toronto International Film Festival, *In & Out* found itself juxtaposed to *Happy Together*, the gay-themed film that won auteurist and art-house filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai (*Chungking Express*, *Ashes of Time*, *Fallen Angels*) the Best Director prize at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival. Critics have been careful to point out that although *Happy Together* features gay characters it isn't a gay film. Wong himself says, "In fact, I don't like people to see this film as a gay film. It's more like a story about human

relationships and somehow the two characters involved are both men. Normally I hate movies with labels like 'gay film,' 'art film' or 'commercial film.' There is only good film and bad film."³ Wong is correct in saying that the film isn't a 'gay film' in that it doesn't make being gay the film's subject matter: a considerable accomplishment given the extent to which sexual orientation still remains a controversial issue in our society. This is partly achieved by the film's narrative premise. Two gay men from Hong Kong have just arrived in Buenos Aires to 'start over'. Seemingly without any plan as to how they will survive in this alien world, they aren't connected directly to the social environment; the film's scope is limited to a fairly narrow vantage point circumscribed by the Lai Yiu-Fai/Tony Leung voiceover narration, which offers a somewhat 'subjective' vision of the world he and his lover Ho Po-Wing /Leslie Cheung inhabit. The viewer is placed within the boundaries of their experiences, which are perceived not as 'gay' but in economic, physical and emotional terms not defined by sexual orientation. The film suggests that the tension in the relationship is due to a conflict between the two men's differing attitudes regarding commitment: Lai appears to want monogamy while Ho is sexually open, which leads eventually to his resorting to prostitution as a means to earn a living. But *Happy Together* isn't essentially about the familiar topic of gay men and the monogamy vs. promiscuity debate. Rather, the film's subject matter is much more elusive and difficult to define concisely. As critics and the director in interview have pointed out, the physical love-making between the two men is shown only at the beginning, when they are still in Hong Kong⁴. This has led to the claim that their relationship in Buenos Aires could be (mis)read by the viewer who missed the initial sequence as being that of two 'buddies' or even brothers. The notion that *Happy Together* is a variant on the 'buddy film' is undercut in a number of ways. In their scenes together and particularly those in which Lai tries to teach Ho

the tango, the actors bring a strong erotic tension commingled with tenderness to the film. Their sensual presences are reinforced by Wong's characteristic aesthetic concerns which are given expression through Christopher Doyle's stunning photography. Cheung and Leung aren't objectified by the camera but the selective colour, spaces and textures Wong and Doyle employ throughout the film provide *Happy Together* with a seductive beauty that is directly aligned to the two men and, later, to the young man, Chang/Chang Chen, Lai befriends and with whom he develops an emotional attachment. The sensual/erotic in the visuals is given its counterpart in the emotional intensity of the two male leads' relationship. Wong has his men expressing an emotional vulnerability about their relationship that wouldn't be found in a 'buddy film'; for instance, after a fight between the two a morose-looking Lai is next seen alone on a harbour boat while the film's soundtrack features a melancholy song. The image foreshadows the film's most extravagant emotional moment: Lai, before returning alone to Hong Kong, visits the spectacular Iguazu Falls, a site he and Ho had originally intended to see together; intercut with Wai's farewell journey to the Falls, Ho returns to the flat they shared and, before breaking down emotionally, manages to fix a mechanism on an Iguazu Falls souvenir lampshade which, when functioning, gives the illusion of water rippling down its sides. During the time the two men shared the flat, the malfunctioning shade was prominent and at one point Wai was seen trying to repair it.

As evident from the above, *Happy Together*, in style and content, is highly infused with Wong's romanticism. With this film, his romantic sensibility is aligned to male relations and, more specifically, to gay men which affords him the opportunity to be very open about his men and their needs. *Happy Together* works as a gay film because it is so unguarded about saying that homosexual men are emotional, but without making them appear any less 'manly' because of these feelings and desires. And, as the film isn't intended

as a political tract on gay identity, it doesn't judge its men—there is no issue here of who is right or correct in his choices or who is being true to what being 'gay' (as opposed to heterosexual) means. Wong's romanticism is also appealing because it indulges passion and excessive behaviour which is what propels and ultimately destroys the relationship between Wai and Ho; alternatively, it can regenerate itself when Wai becomes attached to Chang, but, in this instance, the romance is wistful and the film suggests that a relationship may develop that would be gratifying to both men. *Happy Together* acknowledges the destructive potential in intimate relationships but allows for the possibility of gay men to find relations that are rewarding. While the film doesn't posit Chang as gay, it has him reject the advances of a female employee at the workplace where the two men met. This, in relation to his attentive interest in Wai's feelings and moods, suggests that he has developed a strong personal feeling for him that goes beyond a passing friendship.

Happy Together is conspicuously devoid of female characters. In addition to the Wai/Ho/Chang relation, Wai, late in the film, in voiceover, mentions his father and expresses a desire to reconcile with him. (Wai says he stole money from his father to finance the trip to Buenos Aires.) *Happy Together* is about men relating to men and, by implication, about maleness.

Significantly, the film avoids coding its characters' identities along gender lines. Nevertheless, it is evident that Chang is the most feminine of the three men in that he is gentle, reflective and empathic, but, as Wong doesn't foreground manliness in relation to gay men, Chang's feminine nature isn't a social/cultural/sexual issue. Just as the film doesn't judge its characters in regard to their respective attitudes towards an open relationship, *Happy Together* doesn't evaluate the men as gendered subjects. This isn't to say that the film doesn't implicitly align itself to any of its protagonists—although Chang is given a voiceover narration, Wai is much more privileged in his confiding to the viewer and the film ends

on an upbeat note with Wai's return to Hong Kong and his musings about the possibility that he will meet Chang again. In contrast, Ho is last seen sobbing over the end of his relationship with Wai. There is no suggestion that Ho will have a similar opportunity to begin anew.

Wong Kar-Wai is the writer, producer and director of *Happy Together*; except for the fact that it features gay characters, it is consistent stylistically and in its sensibility with his previous films (at least the ones I have seen), which deal with heterosexual relations. *Happy Together* is a nuanced film which touches on concerns such as loneliness, friendship, notions of the self and relationships, physical desire and emotional needs. It is a film that manages to be passionate and analytic, explicit and reticent, vibrant and pensive. I think *Happy Together* is Wong's finest film to date; it may be that my judgement is swayed by the fact that he has produced a film which presents gay men in a manner that allows for a more complex perception of them as both social beings and individuals. In any case, I find that with this film Wong has managed to express more fully his characters' emotional sensibilities than ever before.

In & Out and *Happy Together* are, in respective ways, films of merit in regard to their treatment of gays and sexual politics and as examples of quality filmmaking. They reflect the wide range of possibilities that are available to filmmakers who want to deal progressively with gay sexuality. The films are of value not because they fulfil transient notions of what a 'gay' film should be but because they are intelligent, creative and pleasurable works.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Max, a wonderful cat, who died shortly before this year's Festival. Max was a great friend who in his own way gave me a great deal of support through his presence and affection. Max appears in an ad in CINEACTION No. 13/14

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3. *Eye*, December 4, 1997 Jason Anderson "Beginning of the end: Love dies in Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together*", page 4.

4. *Village Voice*, October 21, 1997 "Happy Talk": J. Hoberman interviews Wong Kar Wai, page 85.

TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL 1997

Wolves Cry Under the Moon

by Robin Wood

The cinema of Taiwan continues to astonish: so small a country, so many remarkable directors, so many densely worked, intelligent, complex, intellectually and aesthetically sophisticated films, not one of which, aside from Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman*, has been honoured with North American distribution. When shall we be allowed to see, outside the festival circuit and a very few of the more adventurous repertory theatres, the works of Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Edward Yang and Tsai Ming-Liung? Tsai's *Vive L'Amour* is now available on video, for anyone who can afford \$90 U.S. Otherwise, a total blank, and for most of us some of the finest work being currently produced anywhere in the world is beyond our reach. Should we add Ho Ping to the above list? He is, at the lowest estimate, promising. I have not seen his first film, *18*, but *Wolves Cry Under the Moon* strikes me as among the most interest-

ing, and certainly among the most overlooked, films in the 1997 Toronto festival. I attended both of the film's screenings, each time with a very small audience; the film received very little advance publicity, and few people I spoke to seemed to be aware of it. The film is audacious and striking; I am less certain whether it is entirely successful, but this uncertainty may be a necessary consequence of its stance. During its latter half the spectator experiences a rising frustration. The film is built upon the journeys of its numerous characters, to whom many strange and unpredictable things happen, yet one gains the paradoxical impression that it is essentially static: all these people, all these events, but nothing really changes, no one develops, no one learns: everything happens, yet nothing happens. I put this to the director during the question session following the second screening, and he agreed: Taiwan is a small island, the only possible movement is circular, getting nowhere, and this becomes a metaphor for the country's current sociopolitical situation. The main body of the film covers a single night; there is a daytime prologue and epilogue. The prologue establishes the film's dual starting-point: (a) the main highway is closed



Wolves Cry Under the Moon



off, and travellers are advised to use the smaller side roads; (b) a young man assassinates the chief of police. The killing of the Symbolic Father signifies the end of 'normality' (the vast daytime traffic jams), order and rationality (such as it is), announcing the night when (metaphorical) wolves cry under the moon. We follow three main characters on their journeys out of Taipei and into a world of chaos and fantasy, magic and madness: the fleeing assassin, who hijacks an empty bus and becomes involved in an ambivalent relationship with the middle-aged driver, a self-proclaimed 'family man' whose sense of satisfaction and security becomes increasingly eroded; the chauffeur of a wealthy businessman, angry and bitter, loathing his work, ready to steal the car and disappear yet continuing to hallucinate his boss on the seat behind him; and an unpredictably freespirted young woman, Jade, who steals a car then starts up a relationship with its owner over his car-phone as she drives. There are also a trio of puppeteers and a mobile brothel. All the characters are connected to the film's dominant themes: journeys to nowhere; getting lost; the lack of certitude or aim. The film begins as a 'realist' (if complex and extravagant) drama, then moves progressively into a fantastic world as night falls and the characters move on to largely deserted side roads; the progression into this night-world is heralded by Jade's fantasy, watching the scene the car's owner is describing over the car-phone enacted in the middle of the empty road. Dawn brings a return to reality and traffic jams, but only the assassin's story reaches any sort of definite conclusion, by courtesy of a police bullet. I found the film, with its continuous invention of incident and detail, its unpredictability, fascinating; yet the pleasure it gives is curious, since it is inseparable from frustration. However, any Cinematheque preparing a season of Taiwanese cinema should certainly consider it for inclusion.

Robin Wood has completed his final book of film criticism; it will be published by Columbia University Press in the spring of 1998.

TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL 1997

**VISIBLE
CITIES,
INVISIBLE
FREEDOMS**

Uncut
City of Dark

**Exile in
Sarajevo**

by **Marcy Goldberg**

**Cities, like dreams,
are made of desires and fears,
even if the thread of their discourse
is secret,
their rules are absurd,
their perspectives deceitful,
and everything conceals
something else.**

—Italo Calvino, cited in *City of Dark*
by Bruno Pacheco

Three films seen at the Toronto International Film Festival this past September. At first glance, they couldn't be more different. A futuristic sci-fi mystery about a computer-based conspiracy to take over the minds of consumers. A personal odyssey through war-torn Sarajevo. A clever camp multi-genre satire on censorship and circumcision. It so happens that the first is a fiction feature, the second a documentary, the third a 'hybrid' form somewhere in between. But are these useful ways of categorizing the three? What, really, do these labels tell us?

The documentary is structured as a quest narrative, including a love story that ends happily; this does not take away from its impact as politically-committed front-line reportage. The futuristic mystery is full of documentary-like images of the contemporary city, making today's architecture part of a nightmarish tomorrow. And the third film confounds the categories altogether, being simultaneously an essay, a musical, a camp love story, a tragedy, and more.

But the point is not whether a documentary borrows fictional "tropes" or a fiction film uses documentary imagery. Or how to label a film that borrows from too many genres at once. The point is, all three films offer a clear and

urgent critique of the contemporary world, and the danger that powerful institutions and groups pose to individual freedom.

The Body, the City

What is privacy?

A scientist probes individuals' innermost thoughts and dreams via computer. His work is part of a corporate scheme to implant advertising disguised as mass-produced dreams into the minds of the population at large, overwriting the personal unconscious with generic images of consumption.

In the middle of a city, in the middle of a war, young women fetch water wearing high heels and makeup to render their resistance visible. Neither the conflict nor the enemy will determine what gets written on their bodies. But for those caught in the snipers' cross-fire, the limits of the body's fragile resistance are clear—and tragic.

A Canadian citizen is in love with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. He writes him daily letters expressing his affection, but they are intercepted and read by the police. Meanwhile, the media speculates about Trudeau's sex life.

What are the boundaries of private life when politics are so clearly written on the body? How private, really, are our most private thoughts?

Like the body, the city is a network of paths, a structure, a system. In these films the city is a nightmare, a labyrinth, a playground, a backdrop for an opera, a war zone, a place to look for love. The physics of moving bodies meets the geometry of the streets. The logic of wandering through the city is like the logic of the dream... —a logic that is violated when dreams are analyzed and synthesized. What all three films tell us: our dreams belong to us. But they are in danger. Whether the threat comes from business, industry, military force, the law or the political system, the characters in these films fight for the right to inviolable dreams.

These three films, with their dissimilar stories and mix of actual and fictional people and places, are about freedom. The freedom to dream one's own dreams, asleep or awake. To live in peace. To love. And to speak one's mind.

City of Dark

An aesthetic of surveillance

Plato, a high-level computer scientist working for a mysterious and powerful corporation, is developing a method for scanning the human brain which makes it possible to print out and read pictures of other people's memories, thoughts and dreams. In a scan from the brain of a woman he has never met, he finds images of himself, and then of the two of them as lovers. Puzzled and intrigued, Plato uses clues from the woman's thought-patterns to track her down. Her name is Alice, and she is an activist who has been caught trying to infiltrate the corporation's computer system. From her, Plato discovers the real purpose of the research he has been doing: to implant thoughts of luxury goods in people's brains in order to stimulate them to buy these products. Transmission is to take place through widely used electronic devices such as bank machines. Like an information-age Frankenstein, Plato must decide whether he is prepared to destroy his own creation—if it's not already too late.

City of Dark's most obvious antecedent is *Alphaville*, particularly as a film which transforms the city of the present into the city of the future. As Godard did with 1960s Paris, Pacheco has used scenes from contemporary Toronto and made them look like a nightmarish technocratic future. The use of real locations adds an almost documentary-like aspect to the film; the effect is chilling, suggesting that in many ways Plato's world is already our own. In spite of its thriller elements, the film is not paced as a science fiction or crime drama. The plot unfolds in fragments, interspersed with long impressionistic sequences conveying the feel of life in this alienated and alienating on-line society.

Shot in high-contrast black and white, the film's visual style looks back to the early work of the French New Wave, but also borrows from abstract/experimental film and video art. Imagery taken from electronic technology is part of the look of the film: familiar elements such as video displays, computer interfaces and stock market

readouts are taken out of their usual contexts, and appear highly stylized, formalist, abstract. The result is an intricately crafted futuristic look which is strangely familiar and strangely beautiful, in spite of the sinister implications which the film attributes to technology. By emphasizing the form of these everyday objects, however beautiful, the film succeeds at defamiliarizing them. The same principle is used for the soundtrack, with its constant, intricately woven echoes of familiar electronic noises. The film shifts the sound of modems, fax machines, and so on—which have only recently become part of our everyday lives but which we have already grown accustomed to—from the margins to the centre of our acoustic perception.

Permeating the universe of the film is not the cold rationality of science but something more mysterious, more mystic. The 'conspiracy theory' intentions of Plato's corporation can be explained rationally, but the strange coincidences cannot. With a brain-twisting logic reminiscent of *La Jetée*, a photograph of something that has not yet happened leads its happening. The dark atmosphere suggests the supernatural; a sense of evil emanates from the corners of the frame. References to Bosch paintings are reminders of hell, of greedy pleasures paid for with eternal damnation. Plato's moral dilemma raises questions about the ethical implications of scientific research, where there is no such thing as 'pure' knowledge. But Pacheco's vision of a corporate plot to strip individuals of the privacy of their own thoughts by using the channels of electronic consumption also seems to demand that consumers question their own implicatedness in the dehumanizing aspects of technological 'progress'.

Uncut

2 or 3 Things I know about Pierre

The nation's capital, 1979. Peter, a grad student doing research on circumcision, hires Peter, a typist infatuated with Trudeau, to type his thesis manuscript. Both have erotic encounters with Peter, a Jackson Five fan and wanna-be video artist. It's all fun and games at first, but their various obsessions put them on



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the wrong side of the privacy laws. They are sent to jail. And then, tragedy strikes.

Uncut is billed as a "feature drama about Trudeau, circumcision and copyright." Starting from the coincidental fact that in the popular idiom "uncut" means both "uncensored" and "uncircumcized," John Greyson spins some seemingly unlikely elements into a brilliant polemic about freedom of expression and the problematic relationship between artists and copyright law.

Part gay thriller with a foreskin as plot vehicle, part media-literate film essay, in Greyson's treatment the links seem not so arbitrary after all. Artistic integrity, control over one's own body: both raise the issue of the boundary between public and private life. In response to the threat that official policy poses to individual freedom, Greyson strikes back with a work about art, love, and the body, which is also a clever and intricately woven critique of the encroachment of politics on private life.

And Trudeau? Greyson uses the somewhat mythical public persona generated by "Trudeaumania" and the former prime minister's own public statements to explore the limits of public use of individual bodies, and what is projected onto them. In a characteristic example of his original—and cheeky—

way of approaching the political through the personal, Greyson inverts the terms by invoking the specificity of gay desire. Government may not belong in the bedrooms of the nation, but what happens when a private citizen has overheated bedroom fantasies about a government figure? The phrase "body politic" becomes a clever pun, and the links between politics and love are uncovered.

As usual, the scope of Greyson's concerns bursts the boundaries of genre: comedy, melodrama, video art, the camp aesthetic, musicals both high- and low-brow (from opera to music video through Brecht/Weill), documentary interviews, and more. Greyson calls this aesthetic "the logic of sampling"—turning the very form of his film into a demonstration of the difference between parody, pastiche, and plagiarism.

The film also draws on 'case studies' which detail various artists' struggles with issues of intellectual ownership. Greyson refers to his own troubles with the Kurt Weill estate over his adaptation of Weill's work for his short film *The Making of "Monsters"*. (As Greyson points out, the ironic adaptation of existing works and forms was Brecht/Weill's own key strategy...). The film also contains four interviews

which, in Greyson's words, "describe how copyright law, in the name of protecting artists, in fact criminalizes creativity." Each of the interviews is linked with motifs appearing in the drama part of the film. Scholar Tom Waugh talks about publishers' self-censorship when confronted with photos of gay erotic history. Musician John Oswald describes his copyright battles with Michael Jackson. Writer/actor Linda Griffiths discusses her cross-gender Trudeau impersonation in her play *Maggie and Pierre*. And artist A.A. Bronson explains how General Idea Robert Indiana's 'LOVE' logo into 'AIDS'—and why the group encouraged others to "quote" it.

With its 1979 setting, the film takes place in the state of innocence of what Greyson calls the "pre-digital gay community." It is also, of course, pre-AIDS. Still, the Peters' story ends in tragedy. If "silence equals death," so does being silenced against one's will.

Exile in Sarajevo

"A bright spot in a dark Europe"

Alma Sahbaz, co-director of **Exile in Sarajevo*, tells the following anecdote. The director of the Sarajevo Film Festival was asked: why a film festival in the middle of the war? His reply: why a war in the middle of the film festival? A

response that perfectly encapsulates the Sarajevan attitude: dignity, civilization, irony, humour, survival. This is not at all the image of the Bosnian capital typically portrayed in the media. And that's why this film was made: to set the record straight.

Tahir Cambis, an actor/playwright from Melbourne, Australia, arrived in Sarajevo with his camera in 1995 to document life during wartime in the city where his mother was born. To get beyond the stereotyped 'sound bite' voyeurism of CNN et al, he and master cameraman Roman Baska worked on crafting what he calls a "war aesthetic": not to make the war itself look beautiful (as in fascist aesthetics), but rather to reveal its dangers through an aesthetic of immediacy, contingency, and survival. The scenes are often dark because they were filmed during blackouts. Candles are used when there are no lights. Often, the small camera is placed on a mantelpiece so the tiny crew (co-director Sahbaz recorded the sound) could join the others in

front of it. The improvisation and ingenuity necessary to make a film—and a beautifully-photographed one, at that—under these conditions only hints at the resourcefulness and courage needed to survive in Sarajevo altogether.

But for that there are the Bosnians themselves: women fetch water in chic clothes and makeup, because they refuse to be seen as victims. Bands play in bars and cafés that are crowded in spite of the very real danger of

shelling and snipers. Teenagers twirl away at dance contests, constantly aware that each dance may be their last. For one little girl, Nirvana, captured in passing on camera, this is the case: we find out she has been killed by a shell a few days after being filmed. Eventually the cameraman deems the situation too dangerous, and leaves. But with true

Sarajevan determination, this does not mean the end of the film, as Cambis and Sahbaz take turns filming, sometimes with a hidden camera.

The immediacy with which the film conveys the mixture of tragic and stoic, earth-shattering and banal, is one of its main achievements. The attempt to live a normal life during wartime is a cru-



Exile in Sarajevo

cial form of resistance, and *Exile in Sarajevo* makes this clear. A group of young models does a catwalk amid the ruins on the front line: fighting back on their own terms, the young women assert the right to stage their own reality, and to do things that people their age in other parts of the world take for granted. The necessity of creating art in adverse circumstances is one of the most crucial ideas in the film, and a main influence on the project itself.

One of the most devastating elements in the film is the diary of eight-year-old Amira, which chronicles the horrors she has seen since the beginning of the war, complete with illustrations. Rape, murder, the death of her own father, seeing people she's known all her life turn against each other in violence: all are rendered particularly horrific through the lens of her child's perception and stark, matter-of-fact prose style. Using eyewitness accounts from a child brings home the realities of the suffering in a particularly direct and powerful way. But it is also an ideological choice. Elsewhere in the film we see press conferences full of misinformation, hedging and downright lies about the situation being handed out by UN observers and military figures. The contrast between their self-serving versions of the truth, and Amina's simple yet deadly account, brings the questions into sharp relief: Who is an authentic 'observer'? Who writes history?

The film also touches on the ethics of representing atrocities. At one point, Cambis meditates in voice-over on the experience of filming the aftermath of a massacre at the marketplace. Is his commitment to the film or the people? And where does one draw the line? "Film the river of blood," he directs the cameraman. But his decision is taken not as voyeur, but as chronicler.

This is the responsibility embedded in representation: if the city is destroyed and these turn out to be its last images, how should they look? What is most important to show? For this reason, Cambis and Sahbaz choose to focus on aspects of the city's life which may at first glance seem frivolous in view of the tragedy raging all around. But the film's emphasis on cultural life not only serves

to show that producing art in the face of death is a courageous act of resistance. It is also a reminder of what is at stake in the war being fought: the survival of a culture, a civilization. *Exile in Sarajevo* presents a reality that news coverage will never show: the tradition of a vibrant pluralistic city, an important European cultural centre. Over shots of the destroyed national library, Cambis reminds us that Sarajevo's libraries preserved many important cultural documents during the Dark Ages, when most of the rest of Europe had sunk into barbarism. The multicultural tradition of the city, and the role of Muslim civilization in general in keeping aspects of Western culture alive, testify to the long history of Islam's presence in Europe: not as a foreign influence, but as part of the larger cultural fabric.

This point of view may be called "biased." The filmmakers would be the first to admit that they are nothing if not committed. But it is crucial to note what their commitment is: there is no room to be 'objective' about the threat of destruction to [of?] the city they love and the values it stands for. In the ideological minefield of the region's politics, they are not at all interested in rehearsing the old arguments about ethnic rivalry. Their fight is for multicultural democracy against the threat of apartheid and genocide: a struggle which has implications all around the world.

Postscript

So that what we are really doing when we walk through the city is thinking, and thinking in such a way that our thoughts compose a journey, and this journey is no more or less than the steps we have taken, so that, in the end, we might safely say that we have been on a journey, and even if we do not leave our room, it has been a journey, and we might safely say that we have been somewhere, even if we don't know where it is.

—Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (Faber & Faber 1982, p.122)

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**3RD CINÉMA TOUT ÉCRAN
1ST LOS ANGELES
INTERNATIONAL LATINO
FILM FESTIVAL
5TH PAN AFRICAN FILM
FESTIVAL IN LOS ANGELES**

A Rapport of Screens: New Sites for Crosscultural Media

by **Diane Sippl**

**To see without being seen was
your privilege. Now we look back.**
—Aimé Césaire

**If we do not dare everything, the
fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created
from the Bible in song by a
slave, is upon us:**

**"God gave Noah the rainbow sign,
No more water, the fire next time!"**
—James Baldwin

Three decades ago, when Frantz Fanon spoke of cultural decolonization, he envisioned a stage of liberation in which emancipatory self-determination became an act of violence.¹ Likewise, Third World film theorists proposed that after their cinema institutions had refused a dependency on both Hollywood's product and its mode of production, and had managed to use the cinema to critique colonialism, they would create new film languages as well, along with alternative apparatuses for production, distribution, and reception. These gains would come through

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), p. 222.



Riot in the Streets

"hypothesis rather than thesis... unfinished, unordered, violent works made with a camera in one hand and a rock in the other." The camera was regarded as a rifle, "the inexhaustible expropriator of image-weapons," and the projector was seen as a gun that could shoot 24 frames per second.²

What has come to pass in some thirty years is the entry of African American, Asian American, and Latino filmmakers into the studio systems of Hollywood and mainstream television production. While they may yet be few, they are accompanied by new voices in a growing "independent" cinema that suffers with every step toward co-optation and is relentlessly punished by a lack of public funding. The violence today is the hegemony of American

screen entertainment that saturates the world market far more furiously than it did at the onset of decolonization. It is a violence of capital—both monetary and cultural, and of language—both verbal and aural-visual. What I am positing here is that it is no longer the camera and the projector that are the retaliatory weapons, but the screen, a proliferation of screens that are being appropriated in diverse ways by the diasporas of African, Latin American, and Asian cultures as their filmmakers, some emerging and some already prolific, make their way through the multi-dimensional maze of world venues.³

Whether it be the "silver" screen or the TV screen (even as a video monitor) was a question raised at *Cinéma tout écran*, a stimulating conference of media

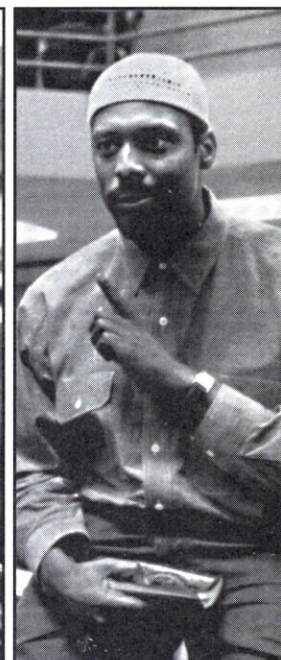
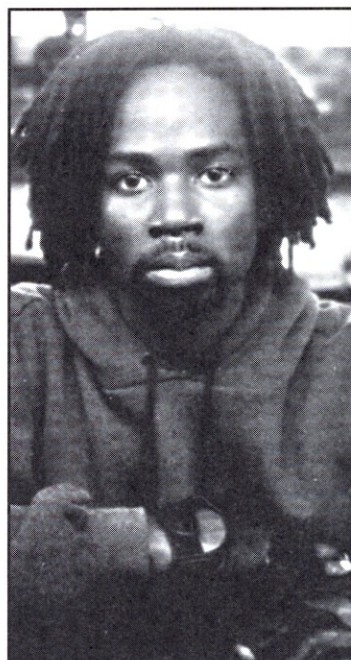
professionals held in Geneva. The brainchild of Léo Kaneman, who also heads the city's *Fonction cinéma* organization for young filmmakers, "Cinema for All Screens" presents cinematic works of art, integrity, and vision produced mostly by or for television companies. The purpose is to challenge each medium with the other so as to enhance their aesthetic cross-fertilization, diversity and quality of cultural accessibility, and opportunities for funding, distribution and exhibition. The 3rd *Cinéma tout écran* (September 15-21) offered an international spectrum of work, and I am commenting here only on a small variety of invigorating and award-winning American products so as to compare them with works shown at the 1st Los Angeles International Latino Film Festival (October 8-12), and the 5th Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles (January 19-29).

One of the eye-catchers of the Geneva program was *Riot in the Streets*, a technically masterful Showtime production that asked each of four directors (Galen Yuen, Alex Muñoz, Richard DiLello, and David C. Johnson) to author his own segment of the feature film. *Riot* is structured by the layering of these separate vignettes upon one nexus of place and time—an intersection in the center of Los Angeles on the day in 1992 when the last of four LAPD officers was acquitted for the beating of Rodney King. Our physical perception of the event is both vertical, with the point of view of a TV news helicopter, and horizontal, as if through the dizzying swirl of a camcorder on the street. Our social orientation is via the on-going reportage on the ubiquitous TV screens in the film. Neither the camera eye, from above or below, nor the edited footage on the TV screens allows us the point of view of the *agents* of this historical uprising—those who set the city on fire. With the fracturing of the narrative, we expect this missing piece to turn up. Instead our perspective remains that of the observer, the victim, or the happenstance participant, even when it comes to looting and shooting. The film absorbs us emotionally in the characters' struggles for harmony and peace. So we watch with "a willingness

to be engaged by simple repetitions of basic themes, by a tradition that locates the spectator in fantasies that have the reality of convention."⁴

One convention is a sensibility and tone that stem from a family ethos. In the first segment, "Gold Mountain," a Chinese-American father and son battle over the meaning of pride: the father pleads, "Stand by me" and the son retorts, "First stand up for yourself." In "Caught in the Fever" a big brother tries to teach a little brother in a Latino family what it means to be a "man." In "Empty" an Anglo American police officer ending his marriage is haunted by the love of his little girl. And in "Homecoming" an African American father-to-be must show his wife how the emotional warmth of his heritage endows him with the faith to make a new start. Each of the protagonists is an innocent young male rendered helpless in the riot. Still the event brings to a head their conflicts surrounding their class aspirations: ownership, respect, and winning—words that echo in the dialogue like the refrain in a four-verse ballad. Ultimately these conflicts converge with an accumulation of impact, if not meaning. For all the riveting camerawork in establishing the separate subjectivities of the characters, the bottom line each time is one they share: "Do for self." All were caught in the riot, and all survive to return to their families, but the cause, the conflict, the effects—a narration of the riot—hardly transpires. "Don't turn it off! The Revolution's gonna be televised this time!" calls out a young black man in a barber shop. It *was* televised, *both* times, and the characters learn no more about it in *Riot* than did the city of L. A. in the midst of it.⁵

In *Riot* the television makes up the very texture of the film: TV's of all sizes fill the *mise-en-scène*, and their black and white images are the informational thread of the film's narrative sutures; static on TV screens is often keenly juxtaposed with visibility through surveillance monitors. Yet the foregrounding of the various genres of documentary "realism" in the text—local nightly coverage, special reports, courtroom news, Holliday's videotape of King—begs few



questions regarding the content and form of these media, their styles, the institutions they serve, or the roles they play. "The news" tells us King was not allowed to testify, firetrucks and LAPD officers were called off the streets, and there was no dialogue between the mayor and the police chief. Had *Riot's* narrative begun to question *why* any of this was true, it would have been structuring a different film, one that posed individuals subjected to a systemic and historical violence simply in its current cycle.⁶ *Riot's* reality is sealed within its thematic and aesthetic conventions: family solidarity, offscreen sounds of cell doors slamming and fires hissing when we never see a jail nor an arson, close-ups on cleavers chopping and

2. Solanas and Gettino, "Towards a Third Cinema," in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 57.

3. Robert Copin, President of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), notes that digital sound and wide-screen, high definition television are changing the artistic capacity for television and its relationship with cinema. He also adds that Europe buys American product for TV programming because there is no market big enough in any other language for Europe's countries to economically produce their own television product.

4. Robert Kolker, *The Altering Eye* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 25-26.

5. In the 1995 documentary, *The Fire This Time*, produced, directed and written by Randy Holland, the 1992 uprising is probed in relation to the 1965 Watts riots and the history before and between them. What changed, and why, is weighed against what remained the same: statistics, documents and interviews support a clear argument as to the sources and forces of the on-going conflict.

6. Examples of such films are the recent *L.A. Confidential* by Curtis Hanson and *The End of Violence* by Wim Wenders.

sticks beating, all as subjective in their registers as the dynamic montages of slow-motion footage cut into violent action scenes to show the characters' interior reflections, memories, anticipations, and auto-surveillance. These scenes are striking, as is the acting by Dante Basco, Alexis Cruz, Luke Perry and Mario Van Peebles. They give us fantasies that are real because we know the codes.

The same can be said for the phenomenal film series, "Rebel Highways," except that the codes couldn't be more different, nor could the fantasies. The nightmare is that in a given American town, monsters will invade and steal your soul while you sleep; without active resistance, you'll become one of *them*. The "monsters" in these films are actually indigenous aliens—they are the mainstream media, consumer products, and dominant ideologies of family, law, and order. The message comes from the 1956 cult classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* that inspired Robert Rodriguez in making *Roadracers*, allowing him to salute the imagination and spirit of 50's B-movies as a popular genre snubbed by the major studios. *Roadracers* is one of ten feature films shot between 1994 and 1996, each by different directors, for Lou Arkoff's Drive-In Classics, which he founded in homage to his father's 1950's legendary American International Pictures with a reprise of the original company's production concept—teen topics (sci-fi, beach comedies, Hell's Angels thrillers, all set in L.A.), shoestring budgets (now \$1,300,000) and tight shooting schedules (12 days). The 90's directors chose their own writers, editors, and D.P.'s and were given the right to the final cut in their creative responses to the source movies of the same titles.

Rodriguez wrote, directed and edited *Roadracers*, a polished choreography of visual stunts, lowbrow thrills and black humor. "THIS IS GOD'S COUNTRY. PLEASE DON'T DRIVE THRU' IT LIKE HELL," warns a kitschy billboard on the highway, and Dude Delaney derails a cop car straight through the middle of it. Two teen girls perch on the back seat of a convertible like prom queens until

Dude inadvertently flings his ciggy butt into the flip of one's hair and catches it on fire, poetic justice for her beau referring to Dude's Donna (Salma Hayek) as a "maid smuggled in from Mexico," (and a *chihuabua*, a *cucharacha*, and a *piñata*). The campy dialogue and visual excesses—of grease and blood, swaggers and sneers—upstage family respect with high-style irreverence, and these subcultural rituals mean not the survival but the death of innocence.

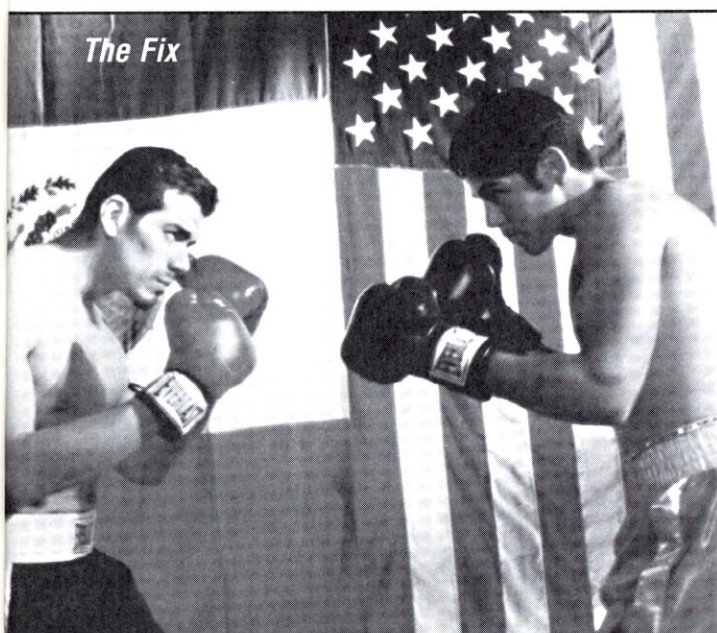
Throughout the series, the films dwell on class rivalry, racism and sexism, attitudes that are countered by larger-than-life, cross-race affiliations celebrating a defiance of the system's dominant values. In *Runaway Daughters*, *Jailbreakers*, and *Girls in Prison*, correctional institutions are motifs for the critique of a false system. For example, in *Girls in Prison*, written by Sam Fuller and directed by John McNaughton, Melba murders a TV commentator who misrepresents her testimony of her brother's death in Korea; Carol kills a drunk by cracking a bottle over his head when he takes the wrong stance regarding her actor-husband-victim of the McCarthy witch-hunt; Aggie, an up-and-coming rock-'n'roll singer, kills an exploitive record producer. Harrassed all over again in prison, the "girls" stage a coup. There is no degree of high style that can detract from this big-screen fantasy steeped in social reality.

The most physically violent and provocatively engaging work at *Cinéma tout écran* was *Oz*, HBO's first dramatic series, written and co-produced by Tom Fontana, who offered Darnell Martin three episodes to direct. The opening one establishes a racially diverse ensemble of "killers," from a cannibal and a drug lord to a drunken driver and a political prisoner, in "Em" (as in "Emerald") City, an experimental unit of Oswald State Penitentiary, whose head believes in redemption and rehabilitation. In "The Routine," as in subsequent segments, the action is confined to *Oz*, allowing Em City to glow with turns in the men's behavior that surprise even themselves, given the brutality that prevails. A Black Muslim preaches non-violence and discipline; a

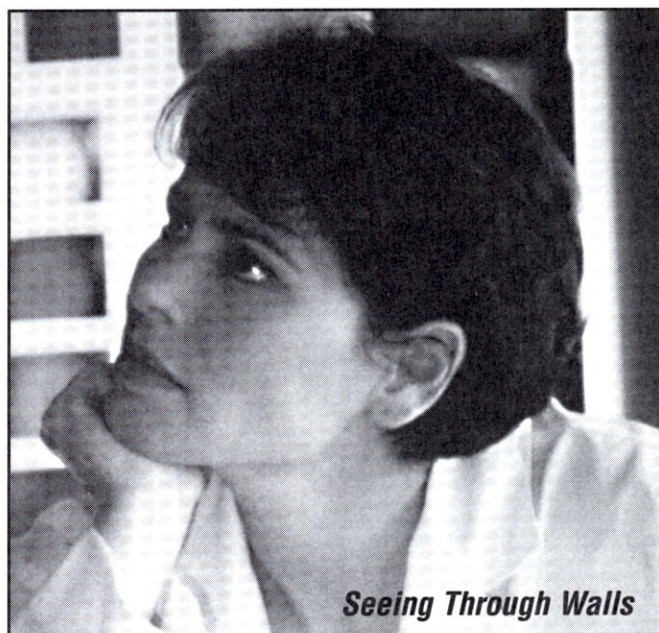
homophobic lifer who can't handle a family visit commits a mercy killing for an inmate with AIDS who sighs, "You probably got me my heroin." Martin's dynamic camera angles and movement are best used with the series' most novel choice, a disabled prisoner-narrator whose insider wisdom about "the routine that kills" provides statistics and interpretations of the *society* as a prison, igniting the social critique the series solicits.

As far from *Oz* as one can imagine lies the subdued eloquence of *America's Dream*, an HBO anthology of three short stories by African Americans set in 1938, 1948, and 1958 with Danny Glover as executive producer. While "making music" is the tie that binds both characters and stories in Maya Angelou's "The Reunion" and John Henrik Clarke's "The Boy Who Painted Christ Black," the process is nowhere more languorous and tortuous than in Richard Wright's "Long Black Song," with "Body and Soul" oozing out of a gramophone brought by a traveling salesman to a lonely black wife on a sweltering day. The directing here by Kevin Rodney Sullivan, as well as by Bill Duke and Paris Barclay for Clarke's and Angelou's stories, creates a meld of word, sound, and image that matches the beauty of the private imagination each author conjured on the page; the film challenges our senses to lay the ground for our politics.

The International Latino Film Festival is, by some vast canyon of default, the first of its kind in Los Angeles. Having said this, it comes as no shock to find charismatic actor/filmmaker Eddie Olmos at its helm as the event's producer and artistic director and a festival home at Universal City. In fact some of the fest's most handsome films, including a Gabriel Figueroa retrospective, were screened in state-of-the-art theaters on the Universal Studios lot. The most stunning aspect of this first festival was its impeccable program, both aesthetically and politically speaking, which showcased new works of all the "Americas"—North, South, Central, Caribbean, and Mexico and Spain as well. Filmmakers were invited as guests



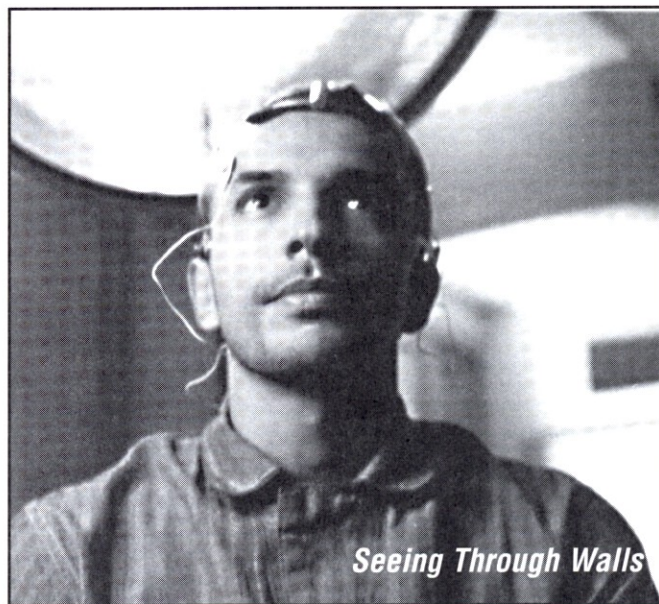
The Fix



Seeing Through Walls



In the Mirror



Seeing Through Walls

of the festival precisely to catch the eye and bend the ear of a Hollywood co-producer or distributor. Olmos, a proponent of film distribution by Hollywood because it affords a level of exposure to Latino cinema that has yet to be matched, claims that, given the location of Los Angeles and Hollywood's long history with Mexican cinema (Figueroa proves the point), this festival is almost a hundred years late. "This isn't for profit," announced Olmos. "It's to bring the culture to light." He managed to get the city of Los Angeles to sponsor it, with free

admission for students.

Olmos has his own schemes for a proliferation of screens: he plans to make Universal City Cinemas a site for the on-going commercial exhibition of Latino films, and along with independent film and TV director Robert Young, he is launching a production company in Puerto Rico so that one of the last of the world's colonies can develop its own film industry. The Latino Book Mart Olmos produced shortly after the festival speaks as his commitment to a verbal literacy to match the aural-visual one he supports

through the screen. "The world today belongs to the multilingual," he shouted to a largely Latino, bilingual audience, as he proceeded to act out a series of "in"-jokes available to hypothetical young filmmakers in their pitches to Hollywood producers when armed with a command of language(s). "In the next century," he continued, "if you speak English only, you'll belong to a new minority."

In fact one of the most original films at the festival was entitled *English Only*, Juan Uribe's futuristic satire that opens with our own explicitly voyeuristic win-



dow onto those who persist in speaking their native tongue. Proposition 187 has been passed, which has led to the "English Only" law,⁷ so neighbors tend to spy with earphones and sound booms, and surveillance camcorders are installed in every room to monitor language use. They take on a human dimension, greeting passers-by with the buzz and wriggle of their focus adjustment as they force their way into the

most intimate exchanges. We are the camera, peering into a young woman's bedroom as she enters only to tear us out of the wall. Have no fear—she is sent to jail and the family will have to pay for our re-installation. Her professor mother will bail her out, but her bank account has already been automatically debited for the new equipment. Later, when her father inadvertently answers the phone with "Bueno" as

opposed to "Hello," his citation costs him \$500, as instantly withdrawn from his bank account as his phone line is disconnected due to accumulated language fines, a fact reported to him in a computerized phone call. Such are the perils of the new millennium, whose Latina daughters are college co-eds divided in lifestyle and commitments *until* they come together to defeat the violence of language that is really a subjugation of culture.

Both the satirical mode and the subjugation theme were carried further in *A Day Without a Mexican*, written, directed, photographed, and produced by Sergio Arau and Yareli Arizmendi. Their "mockumentary," which often looks more like real television news than *Riot's* authentic TV footage, gains the critical edge between the two. It opens when regular programming is interrupted for a Special Report: in the hours before dawn, all Hispanics—that is, one-third of the population—vanished from the state of California. As location cameras close in on a pair of false teeth left behind by a Latino husband, the emergency of such a crisis lends new irony to the term *los desaparecidos* ("the disappeared"). No one can explain what happened. Could this possibly be a voluntary move? A retaliatory tactic? California, the seventh largest

economy in the world, looks like a ghost town. It is suspended from the rest of the country, and on the computer screen, Speedy Gonzalez announces a blackout of the Net. When interviewed, communications experts agree that "we have to go back and study the relation between downloading and Mexicans..." Yarizmendi herself, in a "must-remain-anonymous" silhouette, plays the pathetic wife of a politician who sponsored Proposition 187. Flashes of static disrupt the screen's image on occasion, a technical interference that is most likely remote censorship, since it subverts the discourse at moments when the politics become obscene. Lampooning those who dodge the issues of labor, immigration, social services, and language, the film strategically blurs fact and fiction to ridicule naive notions of "objectivity," "truth," and "documentary realism."

A deeply thoughtful and inspiring anthology series for television was conceived by Carlos Avila as a way of expanding one of the favorite forms of Latino popular culture. The four FOTO-NOVELAS he executive produced for the Independent Television Service (ITVS), funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, are at once more "other-worldly" and more keenly of this world than many works of magical realism; while they draw from the fantastic aspects of the Latin American pulp novel tradition, Avila extends them to new genres to ponder conflicts at the core of today's Latino community. Stylistically, each installment is punctuated with bold graphics that evoke the drawings of *historietas*, the serialized paperbacks that also inspired Avila's pictorial use of light and space. Both *historietas* and *foto-novelas* can be darkly complex, but Avila's stories (he wrote two and directed three of them) are so intense and wondrous in embracing the passions of their characters that once we enter their zone of reality, it's difficult to be satisfied with less. The freedom to move, to know, to love, and to aspire—to value one's tradition, one's family, one's self—has seldom appeared more precious than it does to the death row prisoner, the doctor beginning her career, and the

boxer who learns to bet on himself, each one of them haunted by a vision that is painfully demanding of its potential.

In *Seeing Through Walls*, a Latina researcher persuades a prison warden to experiment with rehabilitation by implanting a microchip of world knowledge in the brain of Gabriel Peña, who thus commutes his sentence to a promise of release. But the overwhelming "release" is his entrée to education, a privilege he was never afforded. When his appropriation of this immense storehouse inspires him to exceed the limits of the experiment, to find solutions to problems outside the program and pursue questions not yet asked, he is told the chip will have to be retrieved if he is to leave the prison. A liberating portrait of Gabriel resists an ending to the story: on the roof of his tall apartment building he shares a meal with his family in the breezy expanse of the Los Angeles cityscape. His young daughter entices him to read a picture book with her. He is at the top of the world, at the most fundamental step of learning.

In a sense, "seeing through walls" is a feat required of 10-year-old Maira in Laura Angelica Simón's politically searing documentary, *Fear and Learning at Hoover Elementary*. Simón, a teacher at this school in central Los Angeles, was catapulted into making the film by her outrage at the state's campaign to enact Proposition 187.⁸ In 60 minutes this vehement attack on cultural bigotry manages to disclose such a hotbed of cynical agendas so thoroughly intertwined with each other that I hesitate to make short shrift of the arguments Simón so deftly develops. Amazingly, it is her subtlety and nuance that impress me as her gift as a documentarian. The film's critique of the position that illegal immigrants should not be entitled to education and health services is structured in a debate among teachers who themselves come from immigrant families, including Simón. Arselia, a teacher who graduated from Stanford against the wishes of her parents, migrant farmworkers, sums up the proposition: "If we get rid of those who make us feel uncomfortable—the poor, the homeless, the dark-skinned, those who speak a language we don't understand... our

lives will be so much better, and we will be worth so much more."

Maira's goals are to graduate from Smith College, become a lawyer, and fight for people, people who are glad about her and thank her for her work. In fact Simón's inquiry into an out-of-character prolonged absence from school on Maira's part ultimately reveals that her father was killed in a robbery, her family was rendered homeless, and they were forced to return to El Salvador. In Maira's life we find the conventional objects of physical violence—guns, knives, drugs. But the film also documents violations of self-esteem. "You are dirty, ugly, uncaring, and irresponsible in your ways," is the message a group of children introject from the school librarian who blames the street's litter on them. Simón portrays the violence of subjugation as particularly insidious by demonstrating what a contradiction it is for a teacher to be forced to report a child to legal authorities for trying to learn, and the contradiction takes on further dimension when we learn that one of the Latina immigrant teachers who organized the city's first demonstration against 187 was a turncoat. The most filmicly persuasive evidence of the hypocrisy of 187 is U.S. government footage from an INS surveillance monitor at the Mexican border that clearly "documents" a dozen people running brazenly past the patrol, with no attempt to stop them—a perfect counterpoint to the Arau-Arizmendi mockumentary's structured absence of those who fled the U.S. Within her interview debate Simón then inserts a bit of live-action footage that looks entirely dramatized and still holds credibility as our own inadvertent surveillance: on our way into Maira's apartment building a passer-by pales with terror as the youth notices two men nonchalantly approaching the staircase, one wearing a mask and the other

7. The Unz initiative petition requires, with exceptions, all public school instruction to be conducted in English and permits enforcement suits by parents and guardians.

8. California's Proposition 187 denies public education and health care to undocumented (illegal) immigrants. It was recently overturned in the courts, but it will be appealed with a vengeance.

passing him a gun.

Fear and Learning teaches us that truths are both relative and circum-spect. They beg interpretation and the test of application. In the film's last image a bashful Maira, self-conscious of her plump figure, sings along with a record she plays—"Missing My Baby"—and Simón, offscreen, coaxes her into dancing. Maira's intimate pleasure that celebrates her bond with her teacher comes across as no conspiracy, but actually gives Simón the authority to claim Maira as her "own." It creates in the film a rhetorical point of view that is the author's and the child's at once, a shared physical and emotional space that evokes the joys of learning in a habitat of safety and trust. Simón has no qualms about sharing this space with us. In the end subjectivity can be a mighty weapon in documenting reality.

"The critical starting point for economic and political subjugation of any people is to first disconnect them from the fountains of their cultural nourishment," noted Ayuko Babu, executive director of the Los Angeles Pan African Film Festival. He is so versed in his broadly international program and so visibly embracing to audiences that the racial homogeneity of the attendees is a shocking disappointment. Babu sees his festival as a way "to be decidedly engaged in the process of cultural rearmament..." This, of course, is the challenge to us all—a knowledge that is not monocultural but *crosscultural*. The Pan-African fest bridged continents and centuries, but also diverse cinematic languages and uses of the screen. In ten days and over 50 films it became clear that any one culture's wellspring is vital to us all, and that aural-visual expression *can* enrich a common literacy.

Subtitled, "Reflections from the Edge," the festival opened with Vondie Curtis Hall's ironic action thriller, *Gridlock'd*. While the singer of a jazz trio (Thandie Newton) lies in a coma from a drug overdose, the two musicians (Tupac Shakur, weeks before he was shot down in a Las Vegas drive-by, and Tim Roth) decide to come clean from their habit. In what emerges as a deeper social drama beneath its edgy

vener, they learn how difficult it is to lose the apathetic environment that all but supports their routines. What they discover they *can't* kick is the system—a lethargy of bureaucratic hoops held out by overworked and underpaid blue-collar peers who succeed in conveying to them that, after all earnest pleas for them to "get with the program," now they'll have to wait their turn—for shelters, HIV testing, and rehab—while dealers fire at them from one end and cops from the other. A scary place, the streets of Detroit. And Tupac could not have been more arresting in bringing home this tragic urban fable. What is amazing is the critique the film manages to pack into its absurd point of view poised at both the social and individual axes as they rotate in time. By omission, the film shores up the potential limitations of posing the family as either the source of or the haven from violence in such otherwise compelling works as *Riot*.

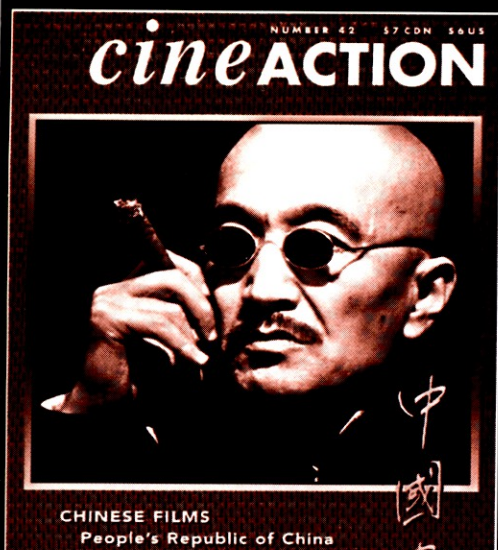
Weekday mornings throughout the Pan African festival the central hall of the giant, glistening Magic Johnson theater complex at the heart of the Crenshaw district was filled with boisterous crowds of school children to view Charles Burnett's feature, *NightJohn*, produced by the Disney Channel. It is one of the most eloquent testaments to the value of literacy to fill the screen, and its presentation at this site was, for Burnett, a return to the place where he, the pre-eminent of African American filmmakers today, came of age. There is no telling what it does to a youth of Los Angeles' black community to spend an hour and a half with a slave girl who, secretly each night, risks her life to learn to read and write. But there was evidence on hand for me of what it does to allow these children a plushly accommodating forum for voicing their reactions to the big screen as Babu, donning his *danchique* tunics and *nwagoro* hats, summoned their lively post-film discussions of history, politics, and gender that ushered in their reflections on the meaning of literacy.

An amazingly large and appreciative adult audience attended a Thursday afternoon screening of Aimé Césaire, a three-part documentary 152 minutes

long by Euzhan Palcy in which she traces her own legacy in Martinique—a crossroads of Europe, Africa, and America—through its foremost activist. Palcy draws from 40 hours of live interviews she has conducted with the co-author of the concept of *négritude*. Césaire, now 85, reflects on his work in France with Senegal's first President, Léopold Senghor and Guyanese poet Léon Damas; likewise, he interacts with writers John Henrik Clarke, Maya Angelou, Maryse Condé, and Jorge Amado. In Paris a friend of Césaire's from Dalmatia comments, "At first I thought he was a basketball player, someone with extreme mobility who indicates his vital space, because he occupies it... who, standing there, takes root. This is what he did with poetry—take possession of the language." Césaire's agile mind and wit steal the screen as they take possession of us, allowing Palcy an enigmatic means for delivering the promise he embodies: a veritable "polycentrism of word and image."

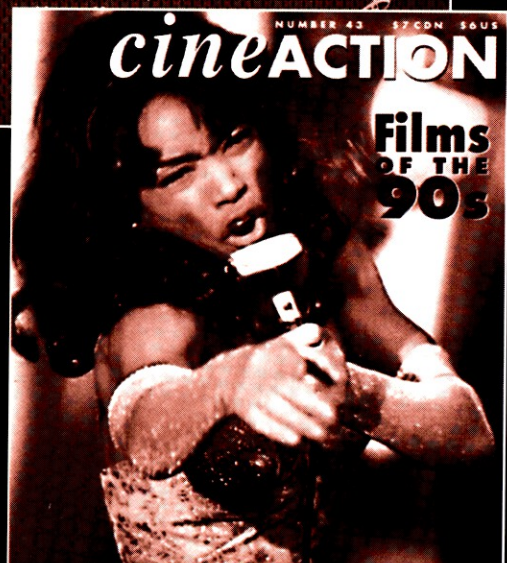
There is a parallel between a Studio Empire that defines what the cinema is and an English Only ideology that defines what a culture is. Issues of the tyranny of Hollywood entertainment product and network television, cultural self-determination, and political violence are, in fact, upon our screens. However, as we use those screens for counter-surveillance, for mediations in the relentless flow of images designed for commercial consumption and interference with our needs, for shared social spaces in learning about ourselves, for personal forages into the imagination, and for venues of cultural reflection, we may find ourselves forging alternative apparatuses for "looking back." As the issues, traditions and innovations of diverse communities gain visibility, it may prove true that cross-screen programming can facilitate a cross-cultural distribution that will allow yet unfamiliar aesthetics and rhetorics to generate new dialogues.

Diane Sippl is a Los Angeles based critic who writes on contemporary world cinema with a focus on American independent filmmaking.



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